

Tristan und Isolde

RICHARD WAGNER (1813 – 1883)

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Welcome

The Canadian Opera Company returns in 2012/2013 with the ultimate season of drama, mischief, love, horror and sacrifice. Ring in the new year with legendary director Peter Sellars and Ben Heppner, one of the world's leading tenors, in a poignant production of the greatest love story of all time, *Tristan und Isolde*, or experience *La clemenza di Tito* – the final operatic work of classical music's uncontested rock star, W. A. Mozart. End the year with people losing their heads: hear Lucia hit the high notes of madness with Donizetti's luscious cascading melodies in the dark and Gothic *Lucia di Lammermoor*; explore the biblical story of *Salome* in a celebrated production by Canadian film director Atom Egoyan; and witness the ultimate sacrifice by an order of Carmelite nuns during the French Revolution in director Robert Carsen's staging of Francis Poulenc's riveting *Dialogues des Carmélites*. The season is sure to inspire, shock and ignite the creativity of your students!

An evening at the opera is more than a night of entertainment. Opera provides many avenues for thought-provoking discussions and can be explored through many subjects beyond the arts, including history, social studies, media literacy, and yes, even science (think acoustics and sound!). The COC's Study Guides help enhance your students' visit to the COC by giving them a glimpse into the history, music, themes and stories of the operas, while suggesting ways of putting their learning into practice.

Thank you for choosing to introduce your students to the thrilling and vibrant world of opera. It takes a creative and courageous educator to expose students to innovative subjects beyond the traditional curriculum, and I hope that the COC's Study Guides become a valuable educational resource for your efforts.

Katherine Semcesen
Associate Director, Education and Outreach

New this season:

Careers in Opera Spotlight

This season each Study Guide features a spotlight on an individual working at the COC. Learn about the many careers in opera and discover how the COC connects to Canada's cultural landscape.

Opera at any stage of life!

The COC runs over 20 programs for school groups, children, youth and adults. Discover more at coc.ca/Explore!

Opera 101

WHAT IS OPERA?

The term “opera” comes from the Italian word for “work” or “piece,” and it is usually applied to the European tradition of grand opera. Opera is a form of storytelling which incorporates music, drama and design.

Though its origins date back to ancient Greece, the form of opera we are familiar with today started in the late 16th century in Florence, Italy. Count Giovanni de’ Bardi was a patron and host to a group of intellectuals, poets, artists, scientists and humanists including Giulio Caccini and Vincenzo Galilei (father to the astronomer and scientist, Galileo Galilei, who was most famous for his improvements to the telescope). These individuals explored trends in the arts, focusing on music and drama in particular. They were unified in their belief that the arts had become over-embellished and that returning to the transparency of the music of the ancient Greeks, which incorporated both speech and song, and a chorus to further the plot and provide commentary on the action, would present a more pure, natural and powerful way to tell stories and express emotions.

The first opera, *Dafne*, about a nymph who fled from Apollo and was subsequently transformed by the gods into a laurel tree, was composed by Jacopo Peri in 1597. From then on the early operas recreated Greek tragedies with mythological themes. During the 17th and 18th centuries, topics expanded to include stories about royalty, and everyday or common people. Some operas were of serious nature (called *opera seria*) and some lighthearted (called *opera buffa*). Since then operas have been written on a wide variety of topics such as cultural clashes (*Madama Butterfly*), comedic farce (*The Barber of Seville*), politicians on foreign visits (*Nixon in China*), the celebration of Canadian heroes (*Louis Riel*), and children’s stories (*The Little Prince*), to name a few.

The COC presents works in the western European tradition but musical equivalents to European opera can be found in Japan, at the Peking Opera in China, and in Africa where it is called Epic Storytelling.

What are the differences between operas, musicals and plays?

Traditionally operas are through-sung, meaning they are sung from beginning to end with no dialogue in between. Singers must have powerful voices in order to be heard over the orchestra (the ensemble of instrumental musicians that accompanies the dramatic action on stage during an opera). Remember: opera singers don’t use microphones!

Musicals are a combination of dialogue and sung pieces and often include choreographed numbers. The singers often use microphones and are accompanied by a pit band which includes more modern instruments like a drum kit, guitar and electronic instruments.

Plays are primarily spoken works of theatre with minimal singing or music.

There are always exceptions to the rule: though *Les Misérables* is through-sung it is still classified as a piece of musical theatre because of its style of music. By the same token, some operas, like Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, have spoken dialogue in addition to singing.

What does opera feel like?

Take five minutes out of the school day and instead of using regular voices to converse, ask the class to commit to singing **everything**. Make an agreement with the students that it’s not about judging people’s voices but about freeing our natural sounds. Make up the melodies on the spot and don’t worry about singing “correctly.” Did the musical lines help express or emphasize certain emotions?

If so, how?

Attending the Opera: Make the most of your experience

WELCOME TO THE FOUR SEASONS CENTRE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS



Photo: Sam Javanrouh

So you're headed to the opera, and there are a few questions on your mind. What do I wear? Can I take photos of the performance? How will I understand it – isn't opera in another language?! Relax! Here are a few tips on how to get the most out of your opera experience.

First, there's the question of **what to wear**. Some people think of the opera and imagine the entire audience decked out in ballgowns and tuxes, but that's just not the case! People wear all sorts of things to the opera – jeans, dress pants, cocktail dresses, suits, etc. The important thing is to be comfortable and show personal flair. Wear something that makes you feel good, whether it be jeans or your nicest tie, and grab a sweater before you leave home – the air conditioning can be a bit chilly! Additionally, skip that spritz of perfume or cologne before you go out; the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is scent-free. Many fellow patrons are allergic to strong scents.

Once you're dressed, it's important to **arrive on time** for the show. Late patrons cannot be admitted to the theatre, and you may have to watch the first act from a screen in the lobby rather than your seat. If you need to buy or pick up a

ticket, arrive as early as possible, as sometimes the line-up for the box office can be quite long before a performance! The main doors open one hour before the performance starts. Line up there and have your ticket ready to present to the usher. If you have any questions about the performance, drop by the Welcome Desk to ask a member of the COC staff, who are full of useful information not only about the opera, but about COC programs in general. A **pre-performance chat** takes place in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre (Ring 3 of the lobby) about 45 minutes before the show. These chats, given by members of our **COC Volunteer Speakers Bureau**, offer valuable insight into both the opera and the specific production that you'll be seeing.

Before the opera starts, take the opportunity to **explore the lobby**, known as the Isadore and Rosalie Sharp City Room. The Four Seasons Centre is Canada's first purposebuilt opera house, engineered with state-of-the-art design and technology for the best possible acoustics. Notice that the sound of traffic, streetcars and the general bustle of the city barely reaches the lobby, even though an airy glass wall looks out onto one of the busiest intersections in Toronto.

Stop by one of the bars and **order a beverage for intermission or purchase a snack**. Browse the Opera Shop to pick up a memento of your experience at the opera. (Note: the Opera Shop is not open at dress rehearsals.) Walk up the stairs, passing a sculpture as you go, and note the floating glass staircase – the longest free-standing glass staircase in the world! On the third floor, you'll see the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre, home to our Free Concert Series. You'll also see a mobile by artist Alexander Calder, adding some colour and whimsy to the space.

Chimes ring throughout the lobby starting **ten minutes** before the performance, reminding everyone to get to their seats. Head towards the door noted on your ticket, get a program from the usher, and find your designated seat. It's best to use this time to open any candies or cough drops you might have and turn off your cell phone – the hall is built to carry sound, so small sounds travel further than you may think! If you'd like to get a picture of you and your friends at the opera, do so now – **photography is not permitted** once the performance begins. A camera flash is very distracting to the performers, who are working hard to stay focused and in character.

As the lights go down and the audience quiets, **listen carefully**. Whatever little bit of outdoor sound you might have heard in the lobby (a siren passing, a rumbling streetcar) has been virtually eliminated here. Not a peep! That's because the auditorium is physically separated from

the outside and the ground below, making for the best acoustic experience possible.

Now it's time to sit back and **enjoy the opera**! But wait – you forgot your German-to-English translator! Don't worry about it. **SURTITLES™** are projected on a horizontal screen above the stage. SURTITLES™ originate from the idea of “subtitles,” which are most commonly used in foreign films to make them more accessible outside of their country of origin. The COC was the first opera company to adapt this concept for the operatic stage. Slides containing the English translation of the libretto (text for the opera) are projected in a more visible place for the audience: above the stage. SURTITLES™ were first used by the COC at the premiere of the opera *Elektra* in 1983. Only the name could be trademarked, as the technology for the projections was already in existence. Opera companies from around the world have adopted this audience initiative under different names, and it has revolutionized opera stages around the world.

Make sure to show your **appreciation to the performers** by laughing at humorous bits or applauding after a well-performed aria. If a performer has pulled off some particularly impressive vocal fireworks, it's absolutely acceptable to yell out your appreciation in addition to applause. You may hear your fellow audience members shouting “bravo!” for a man, “brava!” for a woman, or “bravi!” for a group of performers. Feel free to join in!

Wagner's ultimate love story, *Tristan und Isolde*, lasts approximately four hours and 50 minutes, including two intermissions. The opera will be sung in German with English SURTITLES™.

R. Fraser Elliott Hall.
Photo: Tim Griffith



Characters and Synopsis

MAIN CHARACTERS (in order of vocal appearance)

Name	Description	Voice Type	Pronunciation
Isolde	Princess of Ireland	Soprano	ee-ZOHL-duh
Brangäne	Isolde's maiden	Mezzo-soprano	brahn-GEH-nuh
Kurwenal	Tristan's faithful follower	Baritone	COOR-vah-nuhl
Tristan	Cornish Knight, nephew of King Marke	Tenor	TRIS-tahn
Melot	Confidant of King Marke	Tenor	meh-LOT
King Marke	King of Cornwall	Bass	MAR-kuh
Shepherd	Tenor		
Steersman	Baritone		



SYNOPSIS

ACT I

The knight Tristan is taking an Irish princess, Isolde, to Cornwall against her will, where she will be married to Tristan's uncle, King Marke. As they sail closer to their destination, Isolde fumes against Tristan and his past misdeeds. She sends her maid Brangäne to arrange a face-to-face meeting with the aloof knight, but Tristan denies her request. Furthermore, his companion Kurwenal sings a song ridiculing Isolde's fiancé, Morold, who was killed by Tristan sometime ago. Isolde's anger flares when she hears this; she reveals to Brangäne that in the contest with Morold, Tristan was left severely wounded and it was Isolde herself that took pity on him and brought him back from the brink of death by using magic potions and herbs. Bitter about the missed opportunity to kill Tristan, Isolde instructs Brangäne to prepare a death potion. When land is sighted, Tristan finally comes to speak with Isolde. She demands vengeance. A gloomy Tristan offers himself to be slain by sword, but she proposes a toast to friendship instead. They both drink from the cup, yet instead of death, a passionate longing grips them. Brangäne confesses that she substituted a love potion in place of the fatal drink.

"Where am I? Living? What was that drink?" (Isolde)

ACT II

King Marke and his knights have left the castle to go hunting and Isolde is restlessly awaiting a reunion with Tristan in the garden. Brangäne is concerned that one of Marke's knights, Melot, might suspect an affair. Isolde dismisses the thought and sends Brangäne away to keep watch. Tristan arrives and the lovers praise dark night, the symbolic realm of eternal love and truth. Tangled up in passionate embrace they remain oblivious to the passage of time – and Brangäne's shouted warnings – and are soon discovered by King Marke and his men. Marke is heartbroken, uncomprehending, and asks Tristan why he would betray him like this. Tristan is unable to offer an explanation and only asks Isolde if she is willing to follow him into the land of darkness. She replies that she will. Melot attacks with a drawn sword and Tristan is wounded.

"Must I waken?" (Tristan)

"Never waken!" (Isolde)

ACT III

Tristan, with Kurwenal by his side, lies wounded at his castle. Isolde is the only person who can heal him and she is expected to arrive by ship; a shepherd will play a cheerful song when she does. Increasingly agitated, Tristan wishes Isolde had killed him after the duel with Morold instead of letting him live as he does now, in a state of agony. The shepherd's pipe announces Isolde's arrival. In his extreme excitement to see her, Tristan tears the bandages from his wounds. He staggers into Isolde's arms and dies. Marke arrives with his knights but, before they can explain that the King is there to forgive all, Kurwenal kills Melot and is himself killed. Surrounded by grief, Isolde experiences a joyous vision of the world beyond. She collapses on Tristan's body and dies.

"...to drown now, descending, void of thought – highest bliss!" (Isolde)

Genesis of the Opera

RICHARD WAGNER

(May 22, 1813 – February 13, 1883)

Composer Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany. He would go on to become one of the most important composers in the history of music, but even more than that, his work affected the entire subsequent history of art, with many examples of literature, poetry, fine art, and eventually even cinema, showing the unmistakable signs of Wagner's vast artistic influence.

Wagner began to study music in earnest in 1828, turning away from his initial interest in literature. His reputation as a conductor began to grow after he was appointed music director of a small theatre troupe in Magdeburg. It was here that he met and married Christine Wilhelmine "Minna" Planer, one of the theatre's singers. This marriage lasted for 25 years, and was filled with multiple indiscretions, flights from Wagner's creditors and political exiles.

He had his first operatic successes with *Rienzi* (1842), *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*, 1843), *Tannhäuser* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (1850), for which he wrote both the music and the libretti.

Libretti is the plural of *libretto*. *Libretto*, the diminutive of the Italian word for "book," refers to the text of an opera.

Looming large among Wagner's many achievements is the *Ring Cycle*; this series of four, interconnected operas was completed in November 1874, 26 years after being initially conceived.

Based in the town of Bayreuth in eastern Germany, the Bayreuth Festival is devoted solely to the presentation of Wagner's works. It was launched in 1876 with *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhine Gold*), the first instalment of the four-opera *Ring Cycle*. Wagner was personally involved in the creation of the Bayreuth Festival. He oversaw architectural modifications to the theatre to ensure that the large orchestras his operas required, and the particular technical demands of his productions, could all be adequately accommodated. For Wagner enthusiasts today, the Bayreuth Festival is an all-important artistic destination and tickets are notoriously hard to obtain.

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE IN MUSIC HISTORY

In the early 1850s Wagner decided to take a break from writing the *Ring Cycle* to compose something more manageable, which would require fewer singers and musicians to produce. The idea of creating an opera based on the Tristan legend occurred to Wagner in 1854, though he did not tackle the score proper until 1857, and took until 1859 to finish it.

Tristan und Isolde is a significant contribution to the history of art. As one of the landmarks in the evolution of opera, it ushered in the beginning of modern music. Wagner expanded the orchestra's texture in unprecedented ways, and challenged traditional Western harmony through his use of dissonance, a combination of notes that sound harsh or somehow "unstable" to most people.

As you can probably imagine, by employing so many unconventional musical ideas, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* was radically different than anything that had come before it – a truly groundbreaking opera.

To a greater degree than any composer before him, Wagner wanted words, music and action to blend seamlessly in the service of one unifying art form. *Tristan*

und Isolde might be the most successful realization of that concept: a powerful meditation on the ecstatic, overwhelming experience of passion and love told through an indivisible unity of poetry and music.

The French poet, art critic and essayist Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867) observed that Wagner “found it impossible not to think in a double manner, poetically and musically; not to catch sight of each idea in two simultaneous forms, one of the two arts coming into play where the frontiers of the other were marked out.”

SOURCE MATERIAL

The earliest known literary expression of this Celtic legend dates from the 12th century, where it appears in a French work called *Roman de Tristan* by Thomas of Brittany. Wagner probably came to know it from a subsequent version by Gottfried von Strassburg, a German poet of the medieval period who left his adaptation of the romance unfinished when he died in 1210. For the *libretto*, Wagner kept much of Strassburg’s tone and poetic sensibility, though he reduced characters and episodic action to a minimum.

In his autobiography, Wagner wrote that *Tristan und Isolde* would be an immediate hit because the tragic romantic story would be attractive to audiences, and the roles would take their place among the most inviting for a tenor and soprano to perform.

WAGNER’S MUSE

In 1849 Wagner participated in a political uprising in Dresden, Germany. To avoid imprisonment he fled to Zurich, Switzerland. There, his fortunes improved considerably, in part because he had made the acquaintance of several wealthy patrons who were willing to help him out of debt. Particularly significant was Otto Wesendonck, a silk merchant and admirer of Wagner’s music. Wesendonck was married to a writer and poet named Mathilde, a young woman with whom Wagner became quickly infatuated, despite being married himself to his first wife, German actress Christine “Minna” Planer.

Wagner set five of Mathilde’s poems to music and these works have come to be known as the *Wesendonck Lieder*.

Sample one or all of the songs in the cycle. Numbers 3 and 5 are known to be “studies” for *Tristan und Isolde*.

1. “Der Engel” (“The Angel”)
2. “Stehe still!” (“Stand still!”)
3. “Im Treibhaus” (“In the Greenhouse”)
4. “Schmerzen” (“Sorrows”)
5. “Träume” (“Dreams”)

In 1852 Otto Wesendonck arranged for a cottage on his estate to be given over for Wagner’s use. After moving into the cottage, Wagner began an involvement with Mathilde. Their relationship may or may not have remained platonic, but Wagner’s emotional investment in her was clear, and she served as his muse. Wagner’s work at this time was greatly influenced by a longing for Mathilde, which he began to conceptualize through the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer’s vision of humanity being tortured by the gulf between desire and reality is especially present in the second and third acts of *Tristan und Isolde*.

*Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860) was a German philosopher who held that humanity could never fulfill its desires or attain happiness. For him, life represented a permanent condition of pain and suffering, the only possible remedy for which was either temporary distraction – through the contemplation of art, for example – or the negation of desire itself. Wagner would later write that his introduction to Schopenhauer was the most important event in his life.

In 1858, after completing the first act of *Tristan*, scandal erupted when Wagner's wife Minna intercepted a letter from Wagner to Mathilde. Both denied any wrongdoing. Minna Wagner left, going to Dresden and Mathilde fled to Italy. During their absence, Wagner worked on the second act of the opera. On Minna's stormy return to Zurich, Wagner left for Venice. He spent eight months in Venice and completed the second act of *Tristan*. He then travelled to Lucerne where he finished the opera.

PREMIERE AND RECEPTION

Because of the complex music and the depth of characterization required, singers and musicians had trouble learning their parts and found them to be both physically and mentally demanding. Even before its premiere, *Tristan und Isolde* gained a reputation as being “unperformable” after various planned productions fell through. With financial help from King Ludwig II of Bavaria, a Munich premiere was finally set, but the leading soprano lost her voice that afternoon and the premiere was delayed. The opera finally premiered in Munich on June 10, 1865 and received extreme praise and disdain in roughly equal shares. People either hated this work or loved it.

LASTING IMPACT AND GESAMTKUNSTWERK

Throughout his life, Wagner worked to revolutionize the structures of traditional opera in order to create a distinctively German art form and to raise the union of music and drama to new heights. Wagner wrote prolifically about his theories on art; *Opera and Drama* was his most famous work on the topic where he furthered the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a total work of art). This was Wagner's response to traditional opera, which had dominated theatres during his time. *Gesamtkunstwerk* aspires to fuse all the arts – poetry, drama, music, dance, visual and plastic arts. This complete synthesis was intended to occupy a place in the contemporary consciousness roughly equivalent to the ancient Greek cultural experience of art and religion, expressed most potently in the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus (the earliest of the ancient tragedians, the other two being Sophocles and Euripides).

The “total work of art” is a collective enterprise in more ways than one: individual art forms are assembled within its structure, and people collect around the art work as a community of witnesses. They gather to experience the collective truth the artwork affirms about them and their condition. This is precisely how Wagner conceived the Bayreuth Festival: a special venue for his works in which the fundamentals of ancient Greek tragedy would be revitalized in a new shape and form appropriate to 19th-century European society.

Although *Tristan und Isolde* received its world premiere in 1865, it wasn't until 1886 that it was finally performed at the Bayreuth Festival.

The leading tenor who sang the role of Tristan at the premiere died after only four performances and his grief-stricken wife, who played Isolde, never performed again. This fed rumours that the part was so demanding as to be potentially lethal. *Tristan* was not staged again until almost ten years later.

Listening Guide

Enjoy this groundbreaking masterpiece with our listening guide, designed to help you get the most out of Wagner's inimitable genius.

Recording: Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*. Staatskapelle Dresden and Rundfunkchor Leipzig under Carlos Kleiber, conductor. With René Kollo, Margaret Price, Kurt Moll, Brigitte Fassbaender, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Deutsche Grammophon, 477 5355.

You can also enjoy this listening guide at coc.ca/Radio.

1

MUSICAL EXCERPT

Prelude

CONNECTION TO THE STORY

The Prelude introduces the listener to many of the musical themes that will recur throughout the opera. It sets the mood by expressing all of the necessary emotions early on which, in Wagner's own words, include "yearning, longing, rapture, and the misery of love... [leading to] one sole redemption: death, the surcease of being, the sleep that knows no waking!"

MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* is considered to be one of the most revolutionary works in the history of the Western classical music tradition. The longing and agony suffered by Tristan and Isolde over the course of the opera are reflected in Wagner's purposeful disregard of the traditional rules of Western harmony. The famous "Tristan chord" which sounds at the opening of the Prelude (1:46) is constructed from a combination of notes which literally sound unfulfilled, or dissonant. According to the normal "rules" of composition they should "resolve" to provide the listener with a sense of completion or rest. But in order to convey the unfulfilled passion central to his story, Wagner manipulated the harmonic effects and stretched the limits of what was musically acceptable.

2

MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act I: "Weh, ach wehe! Dies zu dulden!" ("Alas, alas to endure this!")

CONNECTION TO THE STORY

Isolde tells of how the wounded Tristan, disguised as "Tantris," came to her to be healed and how she recognized him as the killer of her fiancé, Morold. The scene ends as she curses Tristan.

MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

This scene stands as one of the great examples of operatic storytelling. With a furious rush upward in the orchestra (1:51), Isolde begins a long monologue, giving information about the past and why her state of mind is so turbulent. During the narration, which begins with a fragment of a motif from the Prelude (2:10), we learn that her rage is fueled by an unrelenting bitterness at her treatment as a woman. Her monologue becomes more frenzied as she relates the story, the music reflecting a motif called "Isolde's anger" (8:24). The scene culminates with Isolde's wild curse on Tristan and a call for vengeance and death (10:08).

MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act II: “O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe” (“Oh sink down upon us, night of love”)

CONNECTION TO THE STORY

In a passionate embrace, Tristan and Isolde praise the night in which their love can find its fulfillment; in their growing rapture, this night becomes more and more a symbol of “eternal night” and “death in love.”

MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Virtually the whole of Act II of the opera is a nocturnal love duet. It is in this scene that we really start to understand that for Tristan and Isolde, “day” has become associated with the responsibilities and obligations of ordinary life while “night” represents their union, the ecstasy of physical love and ultimately, the idea that only in death will their spirits become free to find fulfillment in a mystical realm.

Despite all his innovations in the score, Wagner structured this section of Tristan and Isolde’s love duet in a traditional manner with the singers sharing phrases of music and text, and their voices often moving together in harmonies that are quite conventional. Throughout the duet, the orchestration alternates between rich complexity and austere simplicity as the lovers lose all consciousness of the ordinary world.



4**MUSICAL EXCERPT**

Act III: “Dünkt dich das?” (“Think you so?”)

CONNECTION TO THE STORY

Tristan has allowed himself to be wounded in a duel, after being caught with Isolde. Near death, he is thrown into a state of feverish excitement when his friend Kurwenal tells him he has sent for Isolde.

MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Tristan’s slow, painful return to consciousness from his fatal injury is reflected in his fragmented vocal line at the start of this excerpt. He is dimly aware that he has been brought back from the distant realm of endless night where he had been one with Isolde. This first inkling of Tristan’s delirium is reflected in the wild lack of control in his music: the complexity of the chromatic harmony (i.e. inclusion of notes not related to the current key), the lurching tempo (speed) changes and the undisciplined line (4:14), which reaches a fevered pitch as he curses the light that “forever burns even by night to keep me from her” (listen at 5:58). The longing for death which Tristan experiences in this scene is an integral theme in the opera and reflects the influence of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of pessimism on Wagner.

5**MUSICAL EXCERPT**

Act III: “Mild und leise wie er lächelt” (“How gently and quietly he smiles”)

CONNECTION TO THE STORY

Enraptured as she gazes on the dead Tristan, Isolde unites herself with him in death.

MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The most famous vocal passage in the opera, Isolde’s “Liebestod” (literally meaning “love-death”), was actually labeled by Wagner as Isolde’s “Verklärung” which means “a coming to clarity.” This is probably a more accurate description of this remarkable piece in which Isolde comes to the realization that rather than being an end, death is a liberation and a transformation, a transition to a higher state of being.

Musically, the “Liebestod” marks the point at which the unstable “Tristan chord,” first introduced in the Prelude is finally resolved and brought to a long-awaited completion to coincide with the moment of Isolde’s death. Throughout the opera, Tristan and Isolde’s tumultuous relationship has been conveyed in music that is unsettling, carried on a wave of orchestral and vocal sound which always avoids a place of rest. The final mystery of the opera is the couple’s realization that only by yielding to their physical desires and surrendering to the “night” (sex/death) can they discover their souls and eternity together. It is only then that Wagner allows his magnificent score to come to a place of rest with Isolde’s final words, “entrinken, versinken – unbewusst – höchste Lust!” (“to drown, to sink unconscious – supreme bliss!”)

What to Look for

CREATIVE TEAM BACKGROUND

American stage director **Peter Sellars** is one of the most important and innovative figures in the performing arts today. His interpretations of classic works often engage with contemporary political and social issues. For example, Sellars set the action of W. A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787) in Spanish Harlem of a crime-ridden, 1980s New York.

Despite occasional negative reactions to his work early on, Sellars is now universally lauded for his ability to visually and physically express on the stage the dramatic content inherent in an opera's music, as well as his acute understanding of the meaningful connections that exist between present cultural conditions and the great artworks of the past.

In April 2012 the American classical music magazine *Opera News* gave a glowing assessment of Sellars' career, saying that "In making himself an artist whose preoccupations and concerns grapple with nothing less than the fate of humanity, Peter Sellars has created a body of work that will transcend epoch and place, style and fad."

Sellars directs this production of *Tristan und Isolde* in collaboration with video artist **Bill Viola**, a practitioner

of New Media techniques whose work encompasses electronics, sound and image technology. Viola's art is grounded in fundamental human experiences such as birth, death, and consciousness.

SET DESIGN

You'll notice that this production does not feature very much traditional set design. There is no physical boat in which Tristan and Isolde sail, there is no forest in which the lovers affirm their feelings for one another, etc. This absence of set design is informed by the fact that so much of the dramatic energy of *Tristan und Isolde* is situated in the inner, invisible world of the characters' emotional and psychological lives, not in the external locales they occupy.

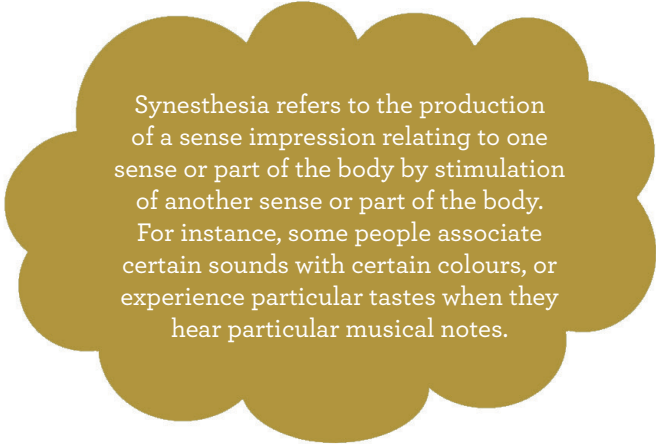
VIDEO IMAGERY

Instead of a three-dimensional set with props, costumes and other theatrical elements, Peter Sellars focuses the audiences' attention on Bill Viola's video art, which is projected on a giant screen behind the singers. (The dimensions of the image vary throughout the performance, ranging from 40' by 21' to 15' by 31'). The video complements the emotional experience of hearing



the music and draws audiences even further into Wagner's passionate, rapturous score. Just as Sellars eschews literal representation of physical spaces when it comes to set design, he favours Viola's images because they go beyond the mere visual transmission of symbols or imagery found in Wagner's libretto. For example, you'll see a man walking through a wall of fire in extreme slow motion, or two people diving into ice-cold water, or a sun rising in real time. This assortment of painstakingly realized images might not include some of the obvious visual cues of Tristan and Isolde's story (i.e. castles, sword fights, etc.), but you're likely to find that Viola's images open up the teeming emotional reality of the lovers' inner world with greater immediacy.

The net effect is a powerful synthesis of imagery, sound and poetry. In fact, the synchronization of the video with the musical flow of the orchestra and singers leads to what Sellars calls "a plunge into synesthesia."



Synesthesia refers to the production of a sense impression relating to one sense or part of the body by stimulation of another sense or part of the body. For instance, some people associate certain sounds with certain colours, or experience particular tastes when they hear particular musical notes.

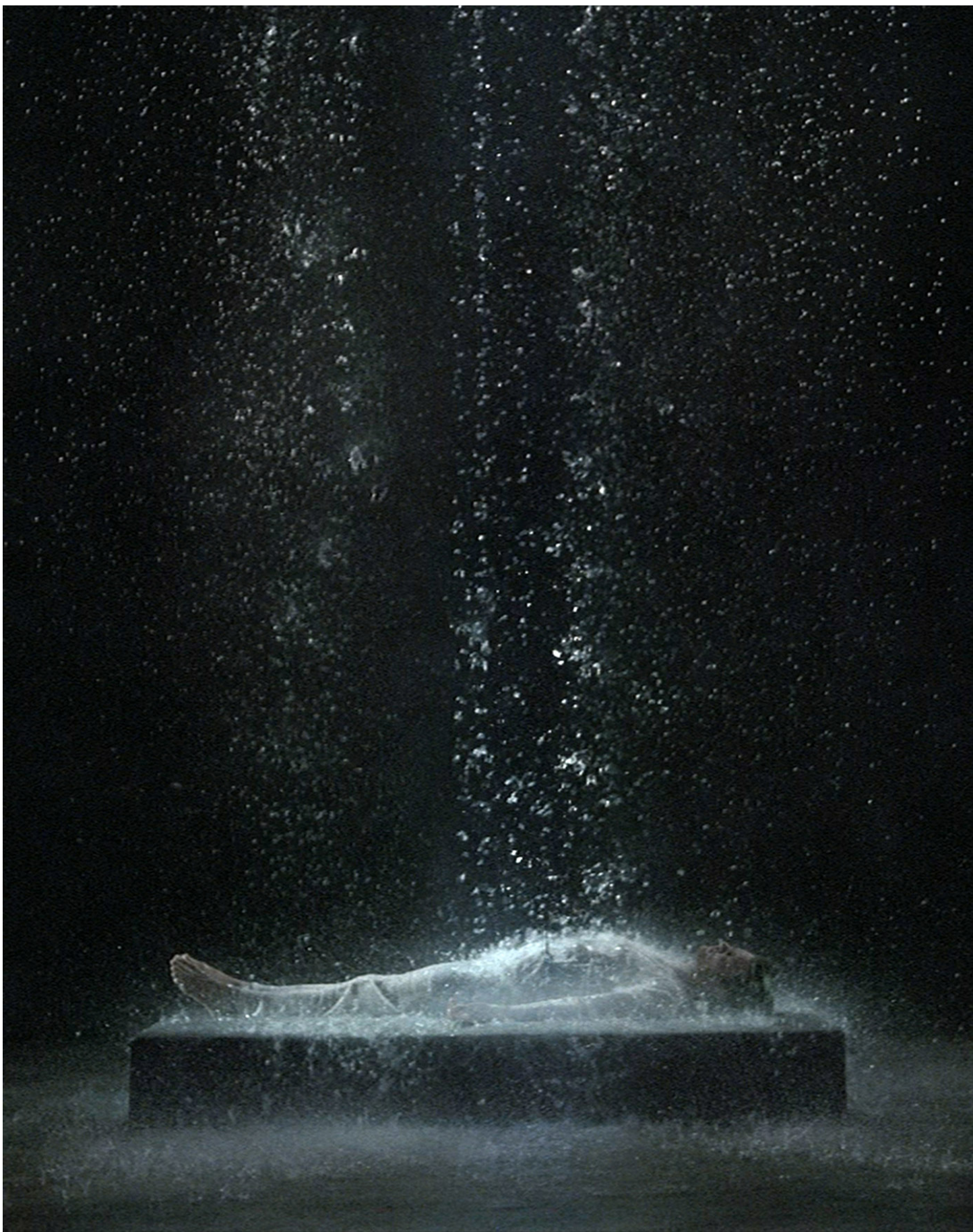
THE ART OF SLOWING DOWN TIME

Bill Viola has manipulated the time flow of his imagery, resulting in extreme slow motion captures. Somewhat like the "bullet time" filmic device in *The Matrix*, Viola's visuals offer an experience of "time-within-time," those moments which are too brief to be captured by ordinary consciousness. With time slowed down in this way, the audience is meant to gain access to the private inner journey of emotion that the two lovers experience.

PRESS PLAY

The technical demands of running a video in perfect synchronicity with a live orchestra are more elaborate than you might think.

Viola's work is made up of many separate segments, which must be carefully blended by the technical director of the video and synchronized with the music. Because a live performance unfolds in a unique way each and every time, a "one-size-fits-all" video would not be possible. What ends up happening is that the conductor in the orchestra pit conducts the video just as much as he conducts the music and the singers. A technical director speeds up or slows down the video as necessary, in response to the conductor's guidance, in order to facilitate a synchronized confluence of image and sound that produces the powerful organic effects for which this production is known.



COC Spotlight: Sybil Choles

Not everyone at the COC is an opera singer... take a peek behind the scenes and learn about the many diverse careers available in the arts! In this edition, we interview Sybil Choles, former Development Officer, Corporate and Foundation Giving. As a fundraiser, Sybil reaches out to

various private companies and government foundations to solicit donations in support of the COC's productions and community and outreach initiatives. The job also involves stewarding existing donors to ensure that sponsorship requirements are met. We asked Sybil a few questions to see what led her down this career path.



Sybil Choles
*(Development Officer,
Corporate and
Foundation Giving)*

Name: Sybil Choles

Role in the Company: Development Officer, Corporate and Foundation Giving

Hometown: Edmonton, Alberta

Education: BA in Music Administration Studies from the University of Western Ontario; Post-Graduate Certificate in Arts Administration from Humber College.

First became interested in opera: At 15, when I attended my first opera, *Aida*.

What made you decide to pursue this career path? I had been training as a musician since I was 4, but I knew I didn't want to put in the practice time (four to five hours a day) to become a performer. While trying to decide what to take in university, my piano teacher suggested I consider music administration since I was so at ease when dealing with people, even ones I had never met before. The rest is history, so to speak.

If someone was interested in becoming a development officer, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?

That's pretty easy for this job. Fundraising is fundraising. Try raising money for a local charity through either solicitations or events. This will give you the experience of working in fundraising at a low level. The difference with fundraising at the COC is size and strategy. Also a working knowledge of business is always an asset! Communication skills are paramount for fundraising. If you can't effectively express the organization's need to a potential donor, you won't get the money.

What do you love most about this career? I love spending time with the COC's patrons talking about opera. Being able to share the experience of opera and then learn why our patrons enjoy the work so much is incredibly rewarding.

What do you enjoy the least about this career? Well, like many other positions at the COC, fundraising is done when the opera is being performed. If you're not at the performance, you won't meet the donors and your ability to do your job will be limited. This means your social life during the opera run takes a back seat to your job. It's not something I dislike, but it is a sacrifice that needs to be made as a fundraiser.

What surprises you most about this career? How intriguing other people find my job. Unless you work in arts administration you don't really get to see that side of it – just what happens on stage. So I'm constantly explaining what I specifically do, and how it affects the final, performed product.

What are you most anticipating about this production? Although there are many different aspects of this production to look forward to – I am most excited about how Peter Sellars and Bill Viola will extend the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* from the opera itself to its staging. This balanced combination of art forms is really something that Wagner was always hoping to achieve on stage.

What do you enjoy outside of opera? Most people at the opera company have a lot of varied interests. Personally, I am a member of Toastmasters (a public speaking club).

You can follow Sybil on Twitter: [@Sybil_Choles](https://twitter.com/Sybil_Choles)



Since this interview was conducted Sybil has returned to her home province to take a senior management position with the [Alberta Theatre Project](#), where she is the Director of Development. Congratulations, Sybil!

Active Learning


One of the best parts of taking your students to the opera is the discussion and further exploration that live theatre can inspire. Take a deeper look into the themes and story of *Tristan und Isolde* with these discussion questions and ideas for further exploration.

DISCUSSION

- ♦ Listen to the slight dissonance in the music as you're watching the performance. What emotions does it evoke? How does this affect the piece? What mood would be communicated if the music were more harmonious?
- ♦ This production combined two art forms from different eras – opera (specifically an opera written in the mid-1800s) and contemporary photography/film. Do you feel this combination was successful? Why or why not? Can you think of other examples where artists have combined two radically different art forms with a successful result?
- ♦ What was in Brangäne's love potion? Create a recipe. Do you think she's pulled a trick like this before? Write a story describing how Brangäne learned to make this potion.
- ♦ Rewrite the last act in your own words. How might things have gone differently? Is there any way that Tristan and Isolde might have lived happily ever after?
- ♦ Many people say the action in the opera is in the orchestra. Why would this be the case?

FURTHER EXPLORATION

- ♦ *Tristan und Isolde* is an opera rich in symbolism. Examine both the libretto and the music and, as a class, compile a list of examples where symbolism is used in the opera.
- ♦ While possibly the most well-known, this is not the only retelling of this tale. Research other versions and compare and contrast.



Did viewing the opera spark some scintillating debates or discussions? Would your students like to share examples of their work with the COC? E-mail us at education@coc.ca – we'd love to hear from you!

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Above: Summer Opera Camp. Photo: COC