

SIX-THIRTY SESSION

TCHAIKOVSKY 4

Akl Phil
2026 SEASON

6.30pm, Thursday 9 April
Auckland Town Hall

Conductor
Pierre Bleuse

Wagner *Tristan und Isolde*: Prelude and Liebestod
Tchaikovsky Symphony No.4

Programme Notes

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Tristan und Isolde: Prelude and Liebestod

Two sections, joined into a single movement

DURATION: c.17'

In the mid-1850s, when Wagner set to work on *Tristan und Isolde*, he had fallen under the influence of two people. First was Mathilde Wesendonck, the beautiful and cultured wife of a wealthy Zürich businessman. After Wagner's revolutionary involvement in Dresden, he and his wife Minna had fled to Switzerland, where the Wesendoncks offered them a small cottage on their estate. Wagner and Mathilde saw a lot of each other. The inevitable happened and their love story was to become enshrined in the music-drama that was being created.

The second person to invade Wagner's life and mind at the time was the philosopher Schopenhauer, whose writings elevated music to the highest place in the arts. In addition, Schopenhauer claimed that for ordinary human beings, earthly fulfilment was impossible. The only course available was a Buddha-like renunciation of desire. In this life, said Schopenhauer, all satisfactions were illusory and temporary, though they might point towards a fuller existence beyond death. So, *Tristan und Isolde* is the story of a hopelessly infatuated couple whose social positions and obligations make love impossible. Each of them accepts death, but as a gateway rather than as an end.

Wagner virtually reinvented his musical language in order to embody the twin aspects of intense longing on the one hand and the renunciation of desire on the other. The opera's opening Prelude builds a musical scenario of unresolved desire by creating a web of discords (including the first, famously named 'Tristan Chord') that move towards concords, but rarely arrive there; or else they touch down momentarily, only to take off again into another phrase and key, seeking their next 'temporary satisfaction'.

In the opera's closing Liebestod, Isolde sings her 'Enlightenment' (Wagner's own word was 'verklärung' rather than 'liebestod' or 'love-death'). Cradling the dead Tristan in her arms, she is transformed and passes on, into the next world.

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Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Symphony No.4

- I. *Andante sostenuto – Moderato con anima*
- II. *Andantino*
- III. *Scherzo*
- IV. *Allegro con fuoco*

DURATION: c.45'

In July 1877, Tchaikovsky rushed impulsively into marriage. The experience was disastrous for both partners, and on the verge of breakdown, he fled Moscow. Later, when he felt able to continue with his Fourth Symphony, he increasingly regarded the work as a musical reflection of his own unhappy state.

To his friend Madame von Meck he offered an explanation of the symphony's 'programme'. The dramatic brass flourish of the opening, with various reappearances, are 'that fateful force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal.' The second movement, he said, was another phase of depression, the third a parade of 'strange, wild and disjointed' images, and the finale provided an outsider's picture of 'the festive merriment of the people.'

Much of the first movement is a restless searching, with lots of cross-cutting from one orchestral group to another, offset by some marvellous solo contributions. Listen for the outwardly jaunty clarinet tune about five minutes in. It leads to one of Tchaikovsky's most ballet-like sections, but is ended by the reinforced might of the whole orchestra, and a doom-laden re-appearance of a 'Fate' theme.

The middle movements enact a similar story of music that tries to satisfy Tchaikovsky's 'impulse to happiness' through the world of dance, but is thwarted by opposing forces. A beguiling string section early in the second movement becomes ever more restless, and some momentary light-hearted woodwind cavorting does nothing to prevent its sad conclusion.

Non-stop *pizzicato* in the third movement *Scherzo* is a brilliant idea, though it doesn't dispel the restlessness. A folk-like trio for woodwinds, followed by brass, is another direct steal from ballet, and the fast return of the *Scherzo* leaves everyone breathless.

In the finale, both tempo and drama are racked up even more, and an innocent little folk-tune *There Stands a Little Birch Tree* is driven to its end by the forceful accents of the brass, and more cymbal clashes than you'll find anywhere outside of a military parade-ground.

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