

# Radiant Romance

May 2, 2026

---

Sponsored by Westminster Oaks  
and Russell B. Rainey, DMD

Michelle Cann, Piano

Richard WAGNER  
(1813-1883)

Prelude and *Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde*

Franz LISZT  
(1811-1886)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major  
Allegro maestoso  
Quasi adagio  
Allegretto vivace-Allegro animato  
Allegro marziale animato

INTERMISSION

Richard STRAUSS  
(1864-1949)

*Tod und Verklärung*

Alexander SCRIABIN  
(1872-1915)

*Le Poème de l'extase*



#myTSO  
@tallahasseesymphony



43



## Program Notes

As you will read, all of tonight's composers are related musically and (some) relationally. Liszt's invention of the "tone poem," a one-movement instrumental work with an extramusical association, certainly prompted Strauss and Scriabin to write tonight's compositions in that form; and Liszt's daughter eventually married Wagner, whose "Tristan Chord" also influenced Strauss and Scriabin. **Richard Wagner (1813–83)**, composer, conductor, essayist, and theorist, was born in Leipzig, Germany. Most of his *oeuvre* consists of operas, which he termed music dramas. His extreme self-confidence is evident in the fact that he himself wrote most of his own opera texts or librettos. Eventually he designed a special theater in Bayreuth, Germany, to stage his productions, some of which are four-to-five hours long. There are various versions of the *Tristan und Isolde* legend, some dating back to the twelfth century. The basic story involves the illicit love affair of a knight, Tristan, and Isolde, who is married (or engaged to be married, depending on the version) to the king. Wagner began working on this project in 1857, and on one September evening of that year, he did a reading of his libretto. Those in attendance included his wife Minna, Mathilde Wesendonck (whom Minna eventually accused of infidelity with her husband), and Cosima von Bülow, the illegitimate daughter of Liszt who was the wife of the conductor Hans von Bülow. Cosima eventually became Wagner's mistress and later his wife and mother of his three children. (Perhaps there was some tension in the reading room that night?) Although *Tristan* was completed in 1859, it was not premiered until June 1865. It was the financial intervention of Ludwig II of Bavaria that finally facilitated the first production, which took place in Munich conducted by . . . (drum roll) Hans von Bülow! (Cosima von Bülow

and Wagner had their first child, named Isolde, out of wedlock that same year.)

Wagner himself created this concert version of *Tristan und Isolde* that pairs the introductory overture (**Prelude**) with the closing aria, **Liebestod**. The restless opening, with the legendary "Tristan Chord" that moves away from traditional tonal harmony, advances from one dissonant chord to another by means of suspension (tying over a note from one chord into the next). Throughout the opera, musical tension is heightened through this delaying of cadences (resting points), lack of resolution, and increased chromaticism (movement by half steps). Wagner was probably the first to use the technique of suspension throughout an entire piece. In *Liebestod* ("Love-Death"), Isolde envisions the resurrection of the dead Tristan. The aria begins in somber fashion with wide leaps in the melodic line alternating with chromatic movement. The tempo accelerates and the nervous strain increases as an ascending string motive accompanies the soprano's anxious melodic line. Upon her death, the opera concludes quietly amidst shimmering harp and strings.

Born in Hungary, **Franz Liszt (1811–1886)** moved to Vienna at age ten and began concertizing the following year. Inspired by the legendary violinist Paganini, Liszt determined to be as dazzling on the piano as the Italian was on the violin. Liszt is reputed to have been the first to turn the piano at an angle so that the audience could watch his hands and famous profile; when possible, he arranged for two pianos on stage so that he could alternate and give everyone the privilege of seeing him from all sides! Liszt was also famous as a conductor and served as Court Music Director at Weimar, Germany, from 1848–61. At the age of fifty

he moved to Rome and took minor orders in the Catholic church and was subsequently known as Abbé Liszt. This was after having three children with his mistress, Countess Marie d'Agoult, whose pen name was Daniel Stern. Their daughter Cosima married the composer/conductor/pianist Hans von Bülow (a Liszt student) but she eventually left him to become the mistress (and subsequently wife) of Richard Wagner. Liszt wrote many piano works and transcriptions, the popular Hungarian Rhapsodies, two symphonies and numerous tone poems. **Piano Concerto No. 1**, whose creation spanned about 23 years, is not a traditional concerto with three separate movements; rather Liszt wrote four sections without pause in a cyclical form. The importance of his vision for a non-traditional symphonic concerto is evident in his original title, *Première Concerto Symphonique pour Piano et Orchestre*. He also utilized the compositional tool for which he became famous, "thematic transformation," in which themes are not developed by variation or modulation to different keys, but their actual character is transformed, such as a love theme might become a march. Themes heard in the fast opening **Allegro maestoso** section are revisited at the end, after a lyrical **Quasi adagio** (slow) section and a playful scherzo (**Allegretto vivace**) episode. It is in the latter, third section that Liszt had the novel idea of featuring the triangle; in fact, an early critic dubbed "Liszt's Triangle Concerto." The energetic **Allegretto marziale animato** finale reveals Liszt's innovative techniques and virtuosic pianism. He premiered the concerto in 1855 with Hector Berlioz conducting.

Münich-born **Richard Strauss (1864–1949)** became an international figure who conducted most of the world's major orchestras. Famous as a composer of

Lieder, opera, and tone poems, he commanded high fees for his scores and performances, earning \$27,000 for the publishing rights to his opera *Elektra* (1908). At age 50, Strauss achieved his goal of becoming a millionaire who could spend his time composing as he wished. In 1933, he chose to remain in Nazi Germany and was named president of the Reichsmusikkammer; nevertheless, his opera *Die schweigsame Frau* was banned because the librettist was Jewish. Strauss was a creative orchestrator who employed all the instruments in equal fashion, often in unexpected ways or registers. His tone poems are romantically descriptive and lushly orchestrated, with emotional extremes and contrasts in sound. At a young age Strauss became fascinated by the music of Richard Wagner and was particularly enamored of *Tristan und Isolde*. Tonight's tone poem, which premiered when Strauss was 26, is in four sections played without pause. Its title is a nod to Wagner's original (but discarded) title for his concert version of *Tristan, Liebestod und Verklärung* (Love-Death and Transfiguration). At the premiere of ***Tod und Verklärung* (Death and Transfiguration)**, the following program notes were provided, written by Strauss's friend, the poet Alexander von Ritter:

I. (Largo) In a dark, shabby room, a man lies dying. The silence is disturbed only by the ticking of a clock—or is it the beating of the man's heart? A melancholy smile appears on the invalid's face. Is he dreaming of his happy childhood?

II. (Allegro molto agitato) A furious struggle between life and death, at whose climax we hear, briefly, the theme of Transfiguration that will dominate the final portion of the work. The struggle is unresolved, and silence returns.

III. (Meno mosso ma sempre alla

breve) He sees his life again, the happy times, the ideals striven for as a young man. But the hammer-blow of death rings out. His eyes are covered with eternal night.

IV. (Moderato) The heavens open to show him what the world denied him, Redemption, Transfiguration—the Transfiguration theme first played pianissimo by the full orchestra, its flowering enriched by the celestial arpeggios of two harps. The theme climbs ever higher, dazzlingly, into the empyrean. [Translated by Herbert Glass]

## DID YOU KNOW?

The famous musical introduction to the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* is the beginning of Strauss's tone poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.

## Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915)

was a Russian mystic, philosopher, and piano virtuoso who studied at the Moscow Conservatory and subsequently taught there from 1898 to 1903. Compositions from this time include piano preludes, three piano sonatas, his only piano concerto, and the *Études*, Op. 8. These early works show the influence of Chopin, and Scriabin is sometimes referred to as “the Russian Chopin.” When he was around 30, however, he moved away from melodic writing in favor of a more progressive, although not atonal, voice. He was fond of quartal harmonies and chords based on the whole tone scale, which resulted in a seamless continuum with no real resolutions (evidence of Wagner's influence). In 1905 he commenced writing ***Poem of Ecstasy*** for large orchestra: piccolo, 3 flutes, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 5 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, bells, cymbals, Glockenspiel, tam-tam,

triangle, celeste, organ, 2 harps and strings. Despite these huge resources, much of the piece involves soloistic winds, harp, and violin and trumpet solos. Its initial title was *Poème Orgiaque* (Orgiastic Poem) and Scriabin made some unusual notes in the score, such as “with a voluptuousness becoming more and more ecstatic.” It was 1908 before the public heard this tone poem that was clearly influenced by Impressionism (Debussy's *La Mer* premiered in 1905; see TSO notes for 3/28/26) as well as by Richard Wagner. Like the latter, Scriabin often composed long melodic phrases that seemingly have no end. As a Theosophist, he believed that man could escape earthly fetters, reach the divine, and achieve a higher consciousness. An eccentric who was influenced by writers such as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer as much as he was by other composers, Scriabin thought his music could change the world. When he died at 43, he was working on a composition that he theorized might bring about the end of the world. Unfortunately, his early death left an impoverished wife and children, so Sergei Rachmaninoff scheduled a piano tour of music composed solely by Scriabin to benefit his family, the first time Rachmaninoff publicly performed music of another composer.

© 2025 Ruth Ruggles Akers

Dr. Akers has a Master of Music degree in Piano Performance from Indiana University and a Ph.D. in Historical Musicology from Florida State University

## DID YOU KNOW?

In 1980 a film titled *Beat the Deva* was based on the life of Scriabin; it was part film noir, part documentary, and part animation.

## Guest Artist

Lauded as “exquisite” by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and “a pianist of sterling artistry” by *Gramophone*, GRAMMY Award winning pianist **Michelle Cann** is one of the most sought-after artists of her generation. Recent engagements include appearances with Chicago Symphony Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, The Philadelphia Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, National Symphony Orchestra, and Orquestra Sinfônica Municipal de São Paulo. She is a recipient of the Sphinx Medal of Excellence and the Andrew Wolf Chamber Music Award, and she served as the inaugural Christel DeHaan Artistic Partner of the American Piano Awards.



Highlights of Cann’s 2025–26 season include appearances with the Colorado Symphony, New Jersey Symphony, Kansas City Symphony, and Ireland’s National Symphony Orchestra. She also performs the world premiere of a new piano concerto by Valerie Coleman with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. Her recital appearances include Stanford Live, Music Toronto, Chamber Music Detroit, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Spivey Hall, and a recital tour in China.

Recognized as a leading interpreter of the piano music of Florence Price, Cann performed the New York City premiere of Price’s *Piano Concerto in One Movement* with The Dream Unfinished Orchestra in 2016. Her recording of the concerto with the New York Youth Symphony won a GRAMMY Award in 2023 for Best Orchestral Performance. She won a GRAMMY Award in 2025 for *Beyond the Years: Unpublished Songs of Florence Price*, recorded with soprano Karen Slack, which features 19 unpublished songs composed by Price. Her acclaimed debut solo album *Revival*, featuring music by Price and Margaret Bonds, was released in 2023.

Cann holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the Cleveland Institute of Music and an Artist’s Diploma from Curtis Institute of Music. She joined the Curtis piano faculty in 2020 as the inaugural Eleanor Sokoloff Chair in Piano Studies, and she is on the piano faculty of the Manhattan School of Music.

Listen now to Michelle Cann’s solo album *Revival*, Music of Price and Bonds, by scanning the QR code below using the camera on your mobile phone. More information at [curtis.edu/revival](https://curtis.edu/revival).



Follow Michelle Cann on Instagram: [@michelleacann](https://www.instagram.com/michelleacann)