

# Boston Camerata to perform 'Tristan & Iseult' at Rockport Chamber Music Festival

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**By Keith Powers / Correspondent**

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The answer is right out the window. The question is why the Boston Camerata will be performing “Tristan & Iseult: A Medieval Romance in Poetry and Music” July 8 at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival.

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The question is why the Boston Camerata will be performing “Tristan & Iseult: A Medieval Romance in Poetry and Music” July 8 at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival.

“The presence of the sea,” says Camerata artistic director Anne Azéma, referring not only to the view, right outside the enormous glass window behind the Shalin Liu Performance Center stage, but also the crucial setting of the ubiquitous medieval tale of tragic love and death.

“That’s why I offered the program to (artistic director) David Deveau,” she says. “Tristan spends a lot of time at sea. The setting and the hall gave me a beautiful chance to work with the sunset and with the sea.”

The story of Tristan is one of the oldest in Europe. Call it Celtic if you like - the tale has its origins in the oral traditions of Ireland, Wales, Brittany and elsewhere. The story existed long before any version was written down - and that was done back in the Middle Ages.

“There isn’t ‘a’ Tristan story,” Azéma says. “We have bits and pieces from many sources. For us, ‘Tristan’ started in 1987, when our label, Erato, approached Joel (Cohen, founder of the Camerata and current director emeritus) and asked about it.

“Our story comes from years of experience, and scholarship, and performance,” Azéma says. “We want to honor a part of the repertoire, but creativity and re-creativity gives way to a new artistry, a new way of approaching it.”

The Camerata’s ‘Tristan’ derives its libretto from two major 12th century sources, Gottfried von Strassburg and Thomas de Bretagne - the oldest surviving written records of the story. The music comes from other sources of the same period.

Azéma directs the production, and sings the role of Iseult the Blonde. Cohen narrates. Baritone Sumner Thompson sings Tristan, tenor Jason McStoots sings King Mark, and mezzo Clare McNamara sings Brangane. Susanne Ansorg performs on multiple early instruments - vielle, citole and lauta.

Anyone familiar with Camerata presentations knows the ensemble creates historically informed, compelling narratives that take their cue from early sources, but are brought to life by the spontaneous artistry of the singers and instrumentalists.

“This isn’t a fully staged production,” Azéma says, “but it’s not just a concert version, either. Peter Torpey (lighting and media designer) and I have developed a relationship over several different productions, and we created a simple way to stage it.

“It has an atmosphere that reveals things,” she says. “I think of it as Noh theater in a way—limited in action, but a beautiful story.”

The festival closes the following evening, with pianist and outgoing artistic director David Deveau joined by incoming artistic director Barry Shiffman (viola), Andrés Cárdenes (violin) and Anne Martindale Williams (cello) in works by Beethoven and Dvorak.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](#); email to [keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com](mailto:keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com).

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