Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Wagnerism

'Tristan' chord

HOW FAR CAN YOU STRETCH A DOMINANT?

Chapter: CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)
Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
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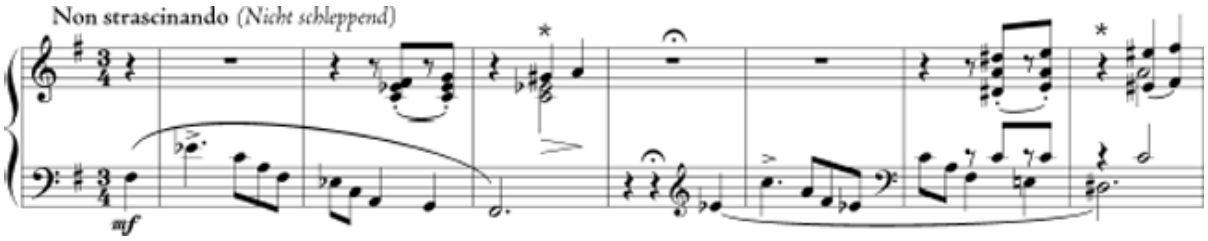
But before making closer inspection of Wagner's mechanisms of arousal, a general comment will be in order. As the most influential composer of the later nineteenth century, Wagner had an effect on his progeny similar to Beethoven's. Just as a multitude of nineteenth-century composers in the "post-Beethoven period" claimed Beethoven as a father however antagonistic their positions, so did a multitude of turn-of-the-century and early twentieth-century composers in the period post-Wagner claim descent from him. And just as Beethoven's contesting heirs made of him what they would, so did Wagner's. On the basis of the chromaticized harmony and the fluid modulatory schemes that we have observed in *Götterdämmerung* and will observe in *Tristan*, Wagner has been cast by many of his followers as the subverter or saboteur of tonal harmony.

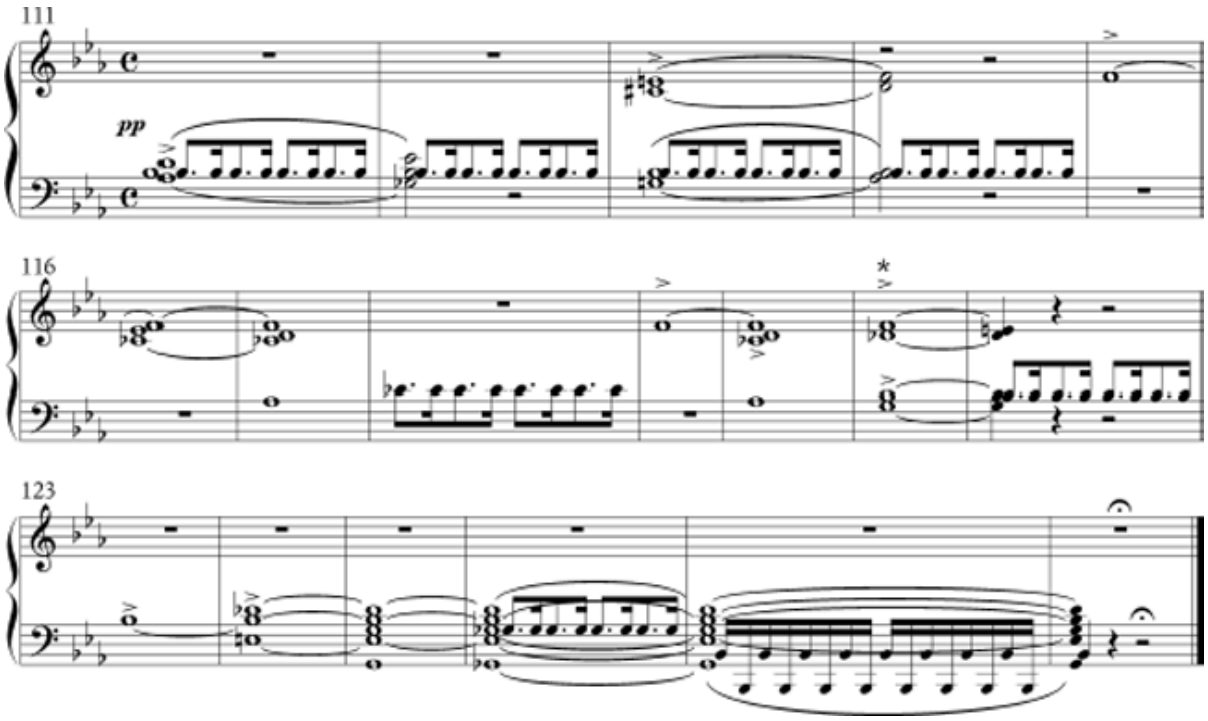
He was anything but that. On the contrary, Wagner brought many aspects of traditional tonal practice to their technical and expressive zenith, always by working within the system. To put this proviso in more rigorous technical terms, Wagner's most important innovations had the effect, as we have already observed, of prolonging and intensifying the traditional dominant function. The true revolutionizers and subverters of tonal practice were those composers, beginning with Liszt in his New German phase, who sought to attenuate or even eliminate the dominant function from their music by replacing the structural functions of the circle of fifths, of which the dominant function is the most potent, with circles of major or minor thirds (see chapter 8).

It would be very easy to imagine a Lisztian variant of the *Tristan* Prelude. Liszt was very interested in the half-diminished seventh chord as a sonority, and may well have played a part in sparking Wagner's interest in the chord whose function he would so radically transform. We have seen how conspicuous the F–A ♭ –C ♭ –E ♭ harmony and its transpositions were in Liszt's symphonic poems and program symphonies, as a glance back at Ex. 8-8b will recall. The introduction to Liszt's song *Die Lorelei* ("The mermaid"), after Heine (Ex. 10-18a), has often been cited as a Wagnerian prototype, though the resemblance is more melodic than harmonic (the chord usually cited as the *Tristan* precedent is in fact not of half-diminished quality). There is an even closer precedent in Weber (Ex. 10-18b), where the harmony before the resolution of the appoggiatura has the same half-diminished quality as the *Tristan*-chord, even if resolution is made downward to a diminished seventh rather than upward to a French sixth.

But such examples are trivial; they can easily be multiplied, even in eighteenth-century music. The Wagnerian innovation, as we have seen, was not the *Tristan*-chord itself, but rather the deliberate failure to resolve the dominant seventh that follows it. But it is a false failure that achieves its awesome expressive power because the traditional resolution is insistently honored in the breach (that is, in our mind's ear).

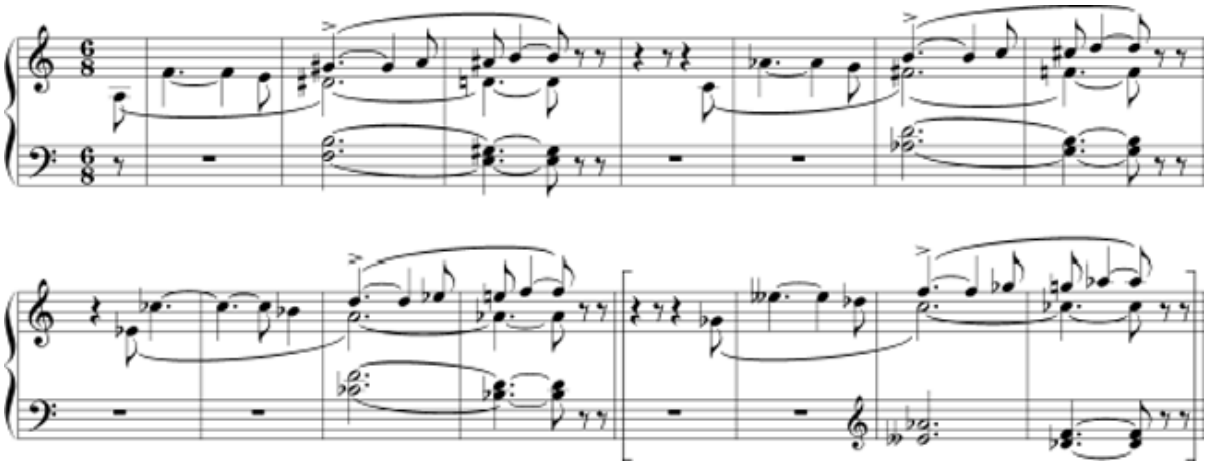


ex. 10-18a Franz Liszt, *Die Lorelei*, mm. 1–7



ex. 10-18b *Tristan*-chord in Carl Maria von Weber, *Euryanthe* Overture

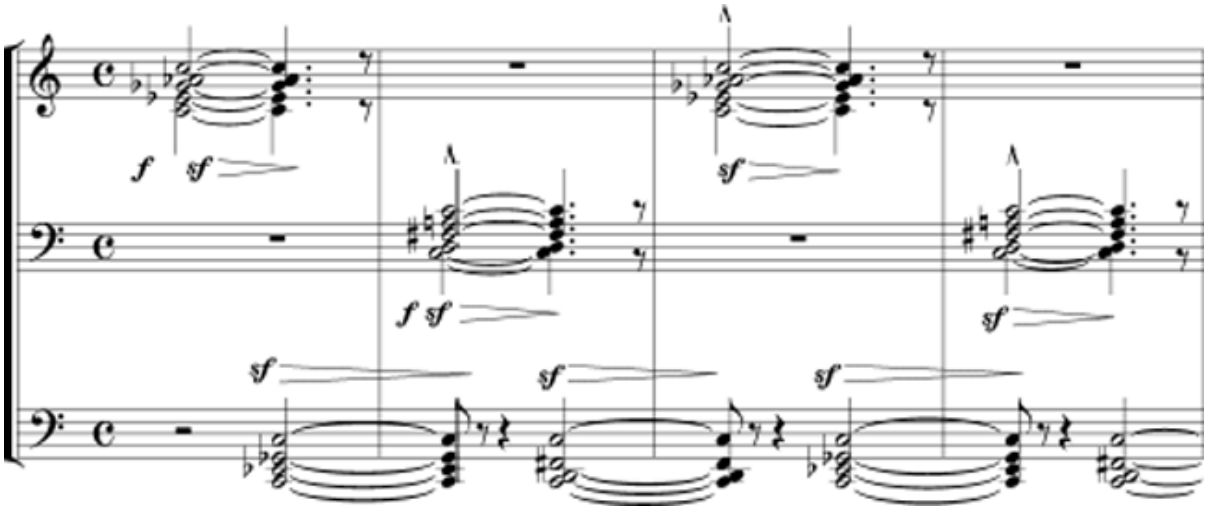
Ex. 10-18a already shows the fundamental difference between the Lisztian approach and the Wagnerian. Liszt's two phrases are in literal sequence, at a transposition of a minor third (expressed in the notation as a diminished seventh). The two finishing chords, therefore, are the same, since the diminished seventh chord, consisting of a stack of minor thirds, replicates itself when transposed by the interval of which it is exclusively composed. The passage neither accomplishes nor forecasts any harmonic motion and embodies little desire. The first sequential repetition in the *Tristan* Prelude is also at the minor third, making its "Lisztian" continuation easy to extrapolate (Ex. 10-19).



ex. 10-19 "Lisztian" variant of Richard Wagner's Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* (opening)

This variant is much more "radical" than Wagner's, and much less effective. In fact it is trivial in its fatal predictability and harmonic stasis. By the third phrase all sense of desire for the dominant seventh resolution has been liquidated by the sequence, just as it is liquidated in the famous passage from the Prologue to Musorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov* (1872) in which the

tintinnabulation of coronation bells is simulated (Ex. 10-20) by two oscillating dominant sevenths with roots a tritone apart (and that consequently share a complementary tritone in common).



ex. 10-20 Modest Musorgsky, coronation bells in *Boris Godunov* (Prologue, scene 2)

So despite the reputation of *Tristan und Isolde* as having instigated a "crisis of tonality" with its notorious freedom of chromatic modulation, Wagner (unlike Liszt and Musorgsky) exercised his freedom entirely within the established practice of functional harmony. Far from threatening it, he managed to wring from the common practice an unprecedented realization of its interdependent structural and expressive potentials, harnessing them together with unprecedented synergy. The paucity of cadences and the frequent changes of harmonic direction in no sense negate or dissolve the efficacy of the traditional harmonic functions (least of all the attraction of the dominant for the tonic). On the contrary, these functions operate in *Tristan und Isolde* with unexampled intensity. That overwhelming intensification of attraction and desire, as we have seen, is the whole poetic point.

The assumption that *Tristan* somehow started the process whereby functional harmony was fatally and inexorably weakened is an excellent example of historicist mythmaking. It embeds the opera in a progress narrative that justifies the radical departures of a later generation of German composers who did in fact attempt to attenuate, and finally eliminate, the role of functional harmony as a governor of musical structure. Their story, sometimes narrated as if it were about the collapse of tonality rather than about the changing techniques of a small group of composers, is a twentieth-century extrapolation. It is in no way implicit in this chapter's tale. It was worth foreshadowing here not only because the myth of Wagner, or of *Tristan*, as the instigator of the collapse has become so entrenched, but also because its entrenchment illustrates so well the historicist tendency to write history backward with an eye toward giving the present a justification, a desired past. Looking at the opera and listening to it, as far as possible, with contemporary eyes and ears (that is, the eyes and ears of *its* contemporaries), we will observe Wagner's reliance on the common practice at all levels from the most local to the most global, and will be all the better able to appreciate his expert manipulations of it. Putting the matter in terms of Wagner's manipulations of his materials—in terms, that is, of compositional technique—is to describe his achievement in "poietic" or "maker's" terms. But Wagner's manipulations of his materials translate directly into esthesic or experiential terms as well, as forcible manipulations of the listener's expectations and responses. Some find the manipulation of their consciousness and their appetites thrilling, others disconcerting, even frightening. It is another of the many factors that have made Wagner an incorrigibly controversial figure.

So we should not be surprised to find that Wagner's superb expressive efficacy depends on a relatively conservative approach to tonality. Comparison of Ex. 10-16, which contains the first eleven measures of the *Tristan* Prelude, and Ex. 10-19, its hypothetical Lisztian counterpart, tellingly illustrates that conservatism. The first difference between them comes at the beginning of the second phrase, which Wagner adjusts so that its first two notes are drawn directly from the preceding dominant harmony: the dominant function remains special for Wagner in a way that it does not for "Liszt," the author of our hypothetical example—or for the actual Liszt, to judge by the "Faust" or "Mountain" Symphonies sampled in chapter 8.

The differences between the respective third phrases are even more telling. Again Wagner adjusts the first note to retain a pitch from the preceding dominant-seventh chord. But then he interpolates an extra semitone both into the descending chromatic line

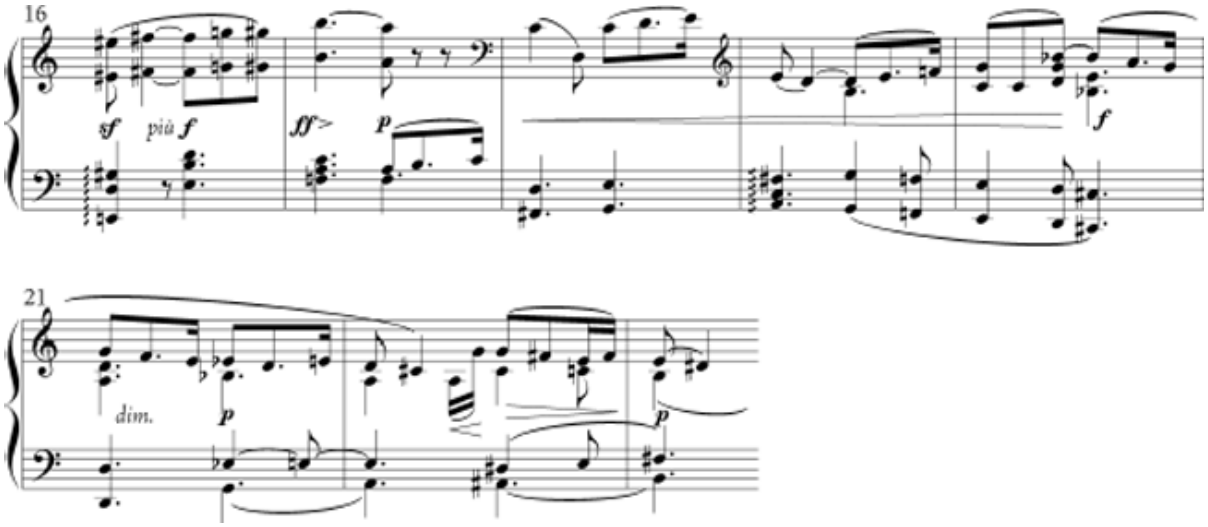
in mm. 8–9 and into the ascending one in mm. 10–11, meanwhile inverting the *Tristan*-chord in m. 10 so that the tritone is on top and the perfect fourth below. The net result of these adjustments is the gaining of a semitone in the second transposition of the phrase. Instead of a simple Lisztian circle of minor thirds, Wagner has transposed the opening phrase first by a minor third and then by a major third. In this way the ending chords apply dominant functions in turn to the root, the third, and the fifth of the governing A-minor tonic triad. Thus the tonic also remains privileged in Wagner in a way that it no longer is in Liszt, whether the hypothetical “Liszt” of Ex. 10-19, or the actual historical Liszt of chapter 8.

As a result of these manipulations, the ending harmony in Ex. 10-16 is the tonally efficacious V of V rather than the tonally meaningless dominant of E ♭ in Ex. 10-19 (or its further sequential extension, the dominant of G ♭). A glance at the full text of the Prelude will reveal that Wagner's V of V is applied quite conventionally to V, which is then applied quite conventionally to I—except that the last connection is frustrated by the grating deceptive cadence on F. The frustration of the cadence becomes the listener's frustration in Wagner the way it no longer does, or even can, within Liszt's more “progressive” and experimental harmonic ambience.

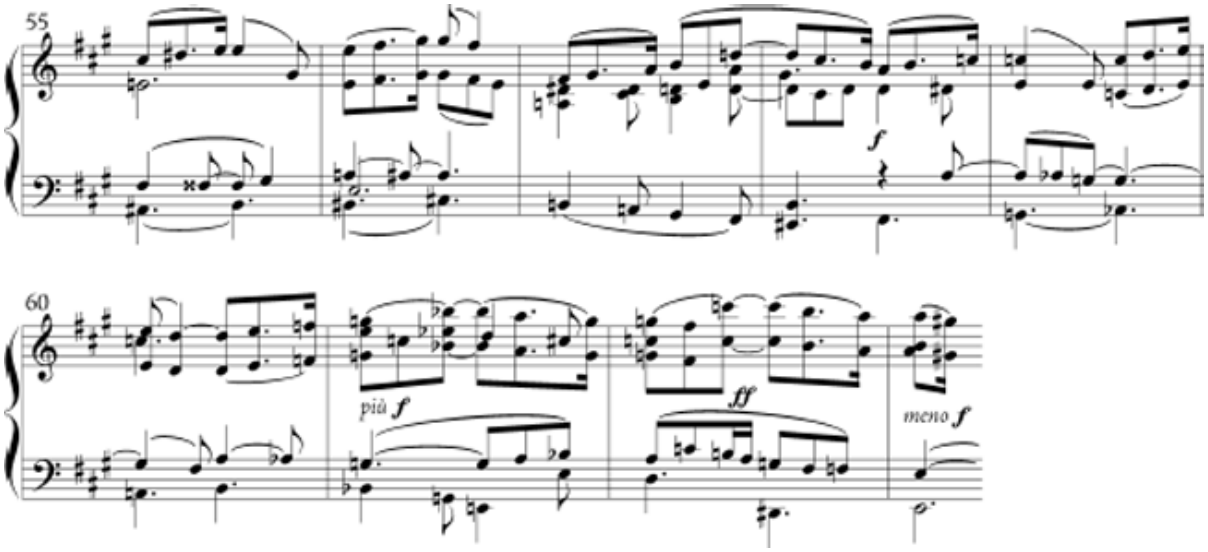
Thereafter, the Prelude is a voyage on the sea of harmony that may be thought of as analogizing the voyage of the ship transporting Tristan and Isolde from Ireland to Cornwall, aboard which the performance of act I takes place. Schopenhauer, who glorified music as a direct sensuous copy of the Will, the primal or essential impulse to be and to become, had used navigational metaphors to describe both music and the Will itself. In its surges and swells, its climaxes on restless harmonies rather than on their resolutions, and its seemingly perpetual state of modulation, the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, which Wagner began sketching in 1856 after immersing himself in Schopenhauer's work, was an attempt conjointly to embody the motion of the sea, the very shape of desire, and (in its abstract, textless, “absolute” character) the pure reality of the Will, as only music could reflect them.

And then, when the curtain goes up on the first act to depict an actual ship at sea on which the flare-up of unquenchable passion will be enacted by a pair of actual lovers whose actions are explained by actually enunciated words, we have the most literal possible demonstration of Wagner's concept of musical drama as “deeds of music made visible.” The entire drama, or at least its essential premise, is powerfully if abstractly enacted in the realm of the “real” before its visual and cognitive embodiment in the realm of “appearances” even begins.

The Prelude's tonal trajectory is in essence that of a single harmonic gesture, announced at the outset, and sustained through a wealth of surface variety to an appearance of climax, followed by a still unconsummated subsidence. Whatever else it may have been, it was a display of composerly virtuosity that no contemporary could deny (or equal), however grudging their acknowledgment. Wagner was surely the greatest master of dominant prolongation since Beethoven. That, far more than the devices of motivic development and thematic transformation that were already the common currency of the New German School, was the essence of Wagner's kinship with his great predecessor.



ex. 10-21a Richard Wagner, Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, mm. 16–23



ex. 10-21b Richard Wagner, Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, 55–63

Far less often remarked is the fluidity of Wagnerian phrase structure, an aspect of rhythm that is every bit as original as the novel harmonic shadings, and every bit as important in achieving the seamless, uncanny transitions to which Wagner gave the name "infinite melody." Upbeats and downbeats can be as ambiguous as harmonic pivots. The main theme of the Prelude, which seems to grow out of the great harmonic balk where the cadence to A major is thwarted by F (and which will come back—once only—in act I, when the lovers have drained their potion and are reduced to the spellbound repetition of each other's name), is the prime case in point. It arises, and mainly recurs, on the upbeat (Ex. 10-21a), but is imperceptibly shifted to the downbeat in the turbulent middle of the piece—imperceptibly, that is, until its next entry cuts off its predecessor after seven beats (= measures; see Ex. 10-21b). Effects like this are as disorienting to the listener, as consciousness-altering, as modulations. In the strictest (Kantian) sense they produce an intimation of the sublime—something uncountable and ungraspable, in the presence of which the Self is dwarfed.