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Tristan und Isolde

WHEN RESOLUTION COMES...

Chapter: CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)
Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The Prelude is thus the opera's essential deed of music, made immediately visible with the raising of the curtain. The resolution of the drama, as Wagner put it in his program note, cannot take place in the visible realm, but only in blissful extinction, which is transcendence of the Will:

> the rapture of dying, of being no more, of ultimate release into that wondrous realm from which we stray the furthest when we strive to penetrate it by the most impetuous force. Shall we call it death? Or is it not night's wonder-world, out of which, as the saga tells us, an ivy and a vine sprang up in locked embrace over Tristan's and Isolde's grave?[49]

The second act of the opera represents “night's wonder-world” on the level of sensuous appearance—the “phenomenal” level, to speak the language of philosophy. The third and final act portrays the attainment of the rapturous fulfillment in extinction: night's wonder-world on the level of the Will, of the truly real, or (as the German philosopher would put it) the “noumenal” plane. The musical relationship between the two acts—in particular, between their climaxes—will once again harness what the music theorist Heinrich Schenker would later call “der Tonwille” (the “tones' will”),[50] the essential structural functions of harmony and rhythm that undergird the visible action. In the Prelude, we have observed these forces in action on the local level, organizing a musical statement of some hundred measures. Now we shall see them functioning on the most global plane, organizing a pair of acts that between them last three hours.

Obviously we cannot encompass the entire two-act, three-hour span in a discussion like this. We shall have to settle on a *metonymy*: a part (or pair of parts) to represent the whole(s). But in doing so we will actually be following Wagner's own plan with optimal economy and focus.

The main event in act II is an extended nocturnal tryst, arranged with the reluctant compliance of Isolde's maidservant Brangäne, who stands watch over the lovers. The situation is that of the *Tagelied*, a genre of medieval German song on which Wagner knowingly drew in order to invest his concept with the historical and national authenticity his theory of art demanded. The long central action of Wagner's act II is in effect an enacted or acted-out Tagelied. It is cast in three big sections. It is in the second of these that the music settles down for the first time in the act into a relatively stable key area (A ♭ major); the lovers lose themselves in the higher reality of night's wonder-world; and the hugely protracted formal patterns of the medieval courtly song with refrains come to the fore.

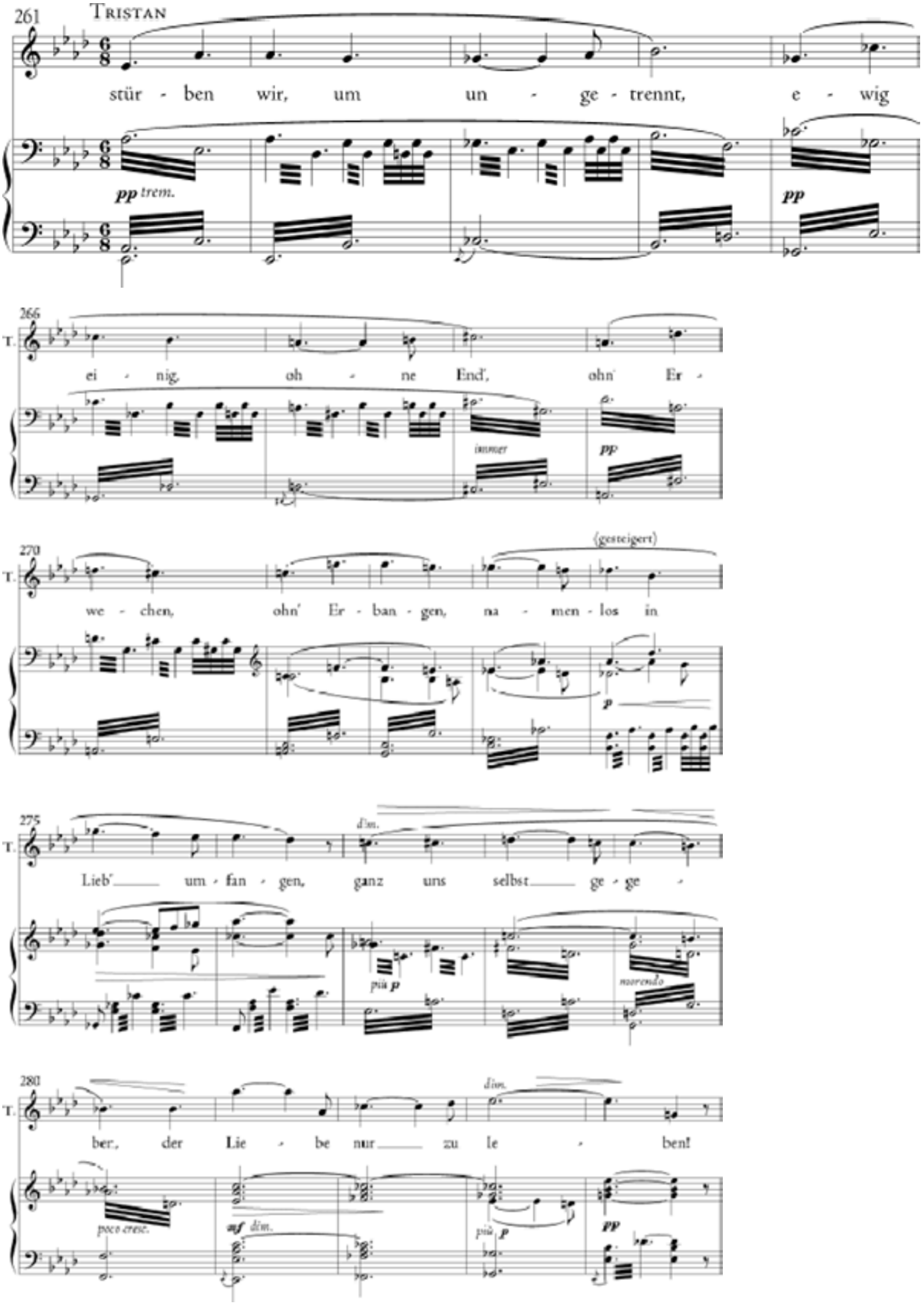
The refrains are Brangäne's, and they consist of the warning—“Habet acht!” (“Beware!”)—to which, locked in their love trance, the lovers pay no heed. Her alarms, though shouted urgently at close range, might as well be coming from another planet so far as Tristan and Isolde are concerned, and Wagner represents the situation with great subtlety. The onset of the trance coincides with a rare authentic cadence, to A ♭ , which establishes, as it were, the home-key of erotic bliss. Beginning with the words “O sink' hernieder, Nacht der Liebe” (“O descend upon us, night of love”), the music the lovers sing is a paraphrase of a song (*Traüme*, “Dreams”), one of five composed by Wagner in 1857 to words by Mathilde Wesendonck, a German poet whose wealthy husband, Otto Wesendonck, was the composer's chief benefactor during his exile in Switzerland. Their passionate though perhaps unconsummated affair (detected by Wagner's wife Minna, leading to divorce and a chaotic period of destitution and wandering) is assumed to have been, along with the discovery of Schopenhauer, one of the main stimuli toward the composition of this most spiritually erotic (or erotically spiritual) of operas.

fig. 10-13 Mathilde Wesendonck (1828–1902), detail of a painting.

The whole section thus initiated, and ending with Brangäne's first intervention, is virtually quiescent in harmony. The tonic pedal initiated at the start holds uninterrupted for twenty-two measures, and is interrupted thereafter only for the briefest digressions, all of which, by circling right back to the pedal tone, may be regarded as embellishments or prolongations of the unchanging, transfixing harmony of night. In one case, excursions to the ♭VI in both the tonic and dominant regions, of a kind familiar since Schubert, are made; in another, the enharmonic transformation of the tonic pedal into a leading tone introduces a series of modulations by ascending chromatic degrees (to A, B ♭, C ♭, etc.) that goes exactly as far as the first primary function of the original key (D ♭, the subdominant) before being redirected homeward; in a third, it is the *Tristan*-chord itself that briefly intrudes to press the harmony voluptuously toward the Neapolitan by way of its dominant.

Only Brangäne breaks the spell—or tries to. That her warnings fall on deaf ears is signaled by the fact that the lightly pulsing syncopations and the shimmering orchestration that together conjure up the lovers' state of ecstasy are unaffected by her entrance. (Wagner's care in marking the score "*Sehr ruhig/molto tranquillo*" at the very point where Brangäne begins to shout is in itself a pointed commentary on the action.) That her voice impinges from "out there," casting the action on a double plane of lower reality (hers—and possibly ours) and higher (theirs—also potentially ours!) is signaled by the harmonic modulation that her

entrance initiates. By the time she actually enunciates her warning, the music is securely anchored in F ♯ (minor, according to the key signature, but major according to the actual harmonies) on its way to a B major that is no sooner sounded than liquidated as the music gradually wends its way back to the lovers' key. The final section or coda of the love-duet-plus-Brangäne, a compressed and frenetic replay of the previous section as the lovers near their climax, begins with a new lyrical theme (Ex. 10-22). That the theme is a transformation of the opening measures of the Prelude (Ex. 10-16) is clear from its contour—an upward skip followed by a descent by chromatic degrees—and from its harmonic plan, consisting of sequential repetitions at the minor third corresponding to the first sequential repetition in the Prelude, only this time going a full Lisztian round (rising fourths respectively pitched E ♭ → A ♭ , G ♭ → C ♭ , A → D, and C → F).



ex. 10-22 Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isode*, Act II, Love Duet ("Tagelied"), mm. 261–284

Except for an abrupt but sumptuous detour to G major caused by Brangäne's second warning, this final section pursues a furious trajectory in which everything seems at once to rise and to accelerate toward liftoff over a dominant pedal that is prolonged even

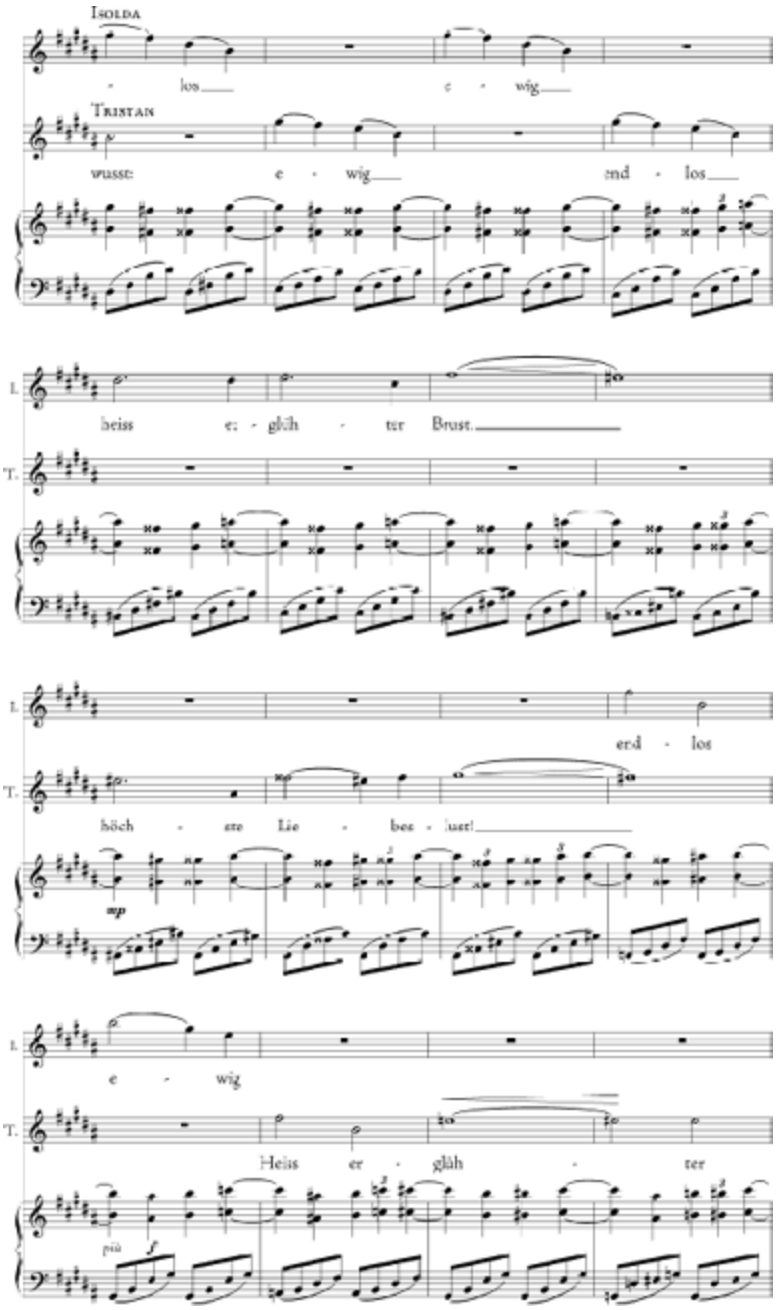
more spectacularly than the one in the Prelude. The dominant in question is F♯ (=G♭), the dominant of B (=C♭). Its implied resolution corresponds to the second of the melodic fourths enumerated in the paragraph above, which itself corresponded with the first upward sequential swing in the Prelude. The whole body of the love scene, beginning in A♭ and now approaching a cadence on B, is thus a vast composing-out of this minor-third motion—the essential harmonic impulse, the "molecular" embodiment, as Schopenhauer would have grasped with joy, of the Will.

The F♯ pedal is sounded where the music is first notated with the key signature of B major. That key will always be announced by its dominant, never the tonic, for it is always represented, like the procreative impulse itself, in a state of perpetual becoming. As in the Prelude, there are various departures, but only to return. The first initiates a chromatic bass descent that gets as far as C♯, the dominant of the F♯ pedal, which is prolonged through a series of Neapolitan relationships and finally redirected to F♯ to coincide with the return of the B-major key signature. That is the first span of the pedal's prolongation.

The next span encloses a rhythmic compression of the previous acclamation to the night in a key area much closer to home. The combination of shorter note values, suggesting greater speed, and a more insistently goal-directed harmony produces the tremulously impending mood of a retransition. The sounding of the inexorably cadential tonic initiates a hundred bars containing virtually nothing but sequences of ever-diminishing (that is, "accelerating") note values and unit durations. At first the singers' parts move in half notes and six-bar phrases. A dozen bars later they are trading two-measure units in four-measure phrases, the second unit in each phrase containing quarter notes. After ten more bars, eighth notes and even sixteenths are introduced (as embellishments) into the vocal parts. After another twenty they are trading phrases made up almost entirely of quarter notes.

In a final approach to the looming, inevitable cadence, the singers' by-now delirious sequences are accompanied by a steady chromatic descent in the bass that spans an entire octave, finally zeroing in on F♯ for what one feels sure is to be the long-awaited consummation. It *almost* happens. In m. 482 the subdominant is shunted in where the tonic was expected, and the tonic, when it finally comes a bar later, is in the irresolute first inversion—a classic Wagnerian feint. But now (Ex. 10-23) the process is repeated: the same melodic trade-offs in the vocal parts; the same chromatically descending bass. This time, however, another ingredient, even more insistently directed at the goal, is added in the form of a sequence in the orchestra of a single bar's unit duration, consisting of nothing other than endless reiterations of the four-note chromatic ascent first heard in the second measure of the Prelude, rising from the *Tristan*-chord.

Twenty-eight times in all this motive resounds. At irregularly contracting intervals it is extended by an extra note smuggled in via a triplet to jack the sequence up by a single chromatic degree in contrary motion against the chromatically descending bass. After another classic Wagnerian feint in the form of a shocking *piano subito*, the singers' parts are drawn into the irresistible soaring sequence. The bass, meanwhile, finally hits bottom on F♯ and stays there, grinding out twelve bars of dominant pedal intensified by a *molto crescendo*, at last pounding out the complete dominant seventh of B major in root position. At this point the rising sequence finally delivers Isolde's part to the leading tone. No composer had ever generated a comparable dominant-tension, for never before had a composer felt the need so to dramatize music's most basic business.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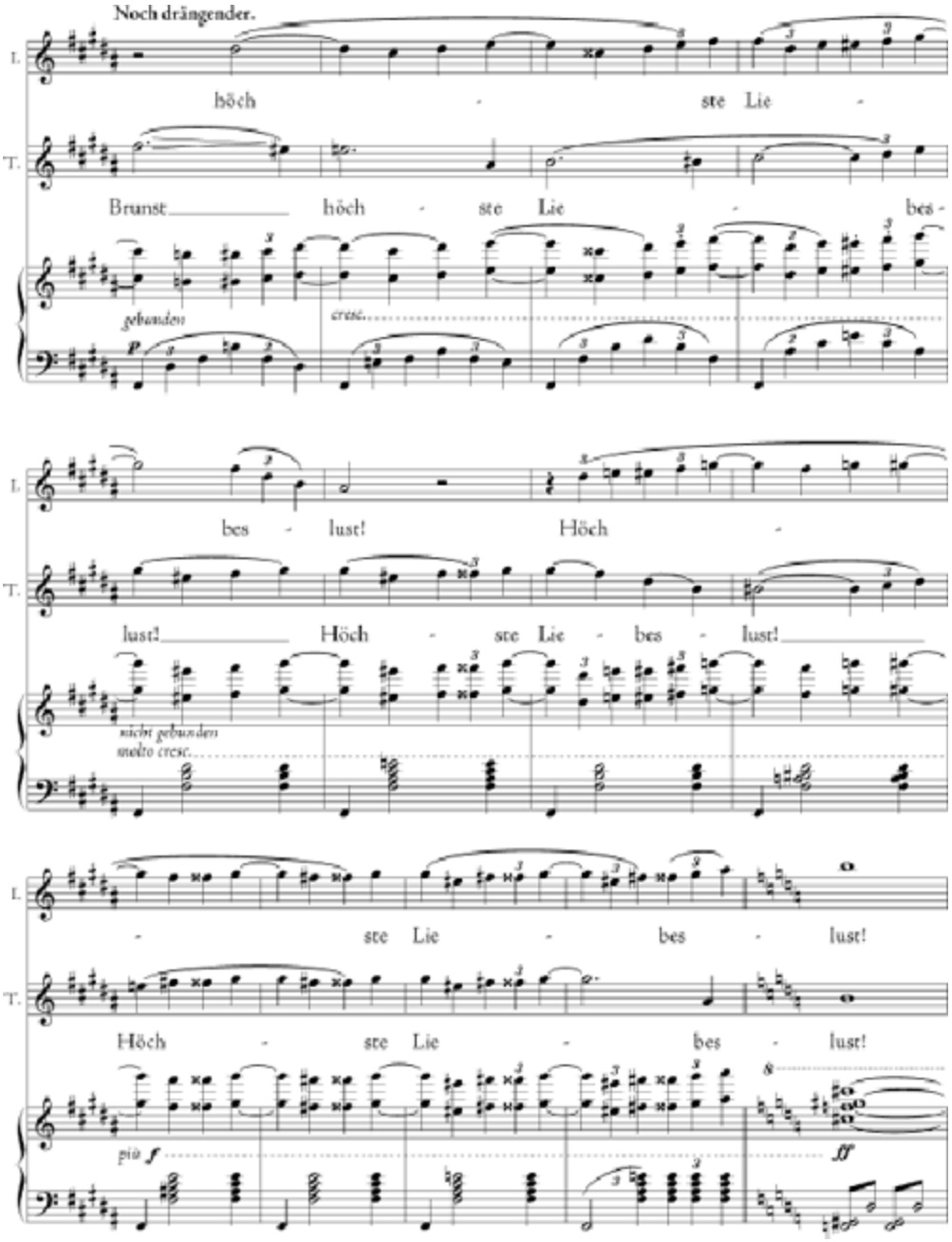
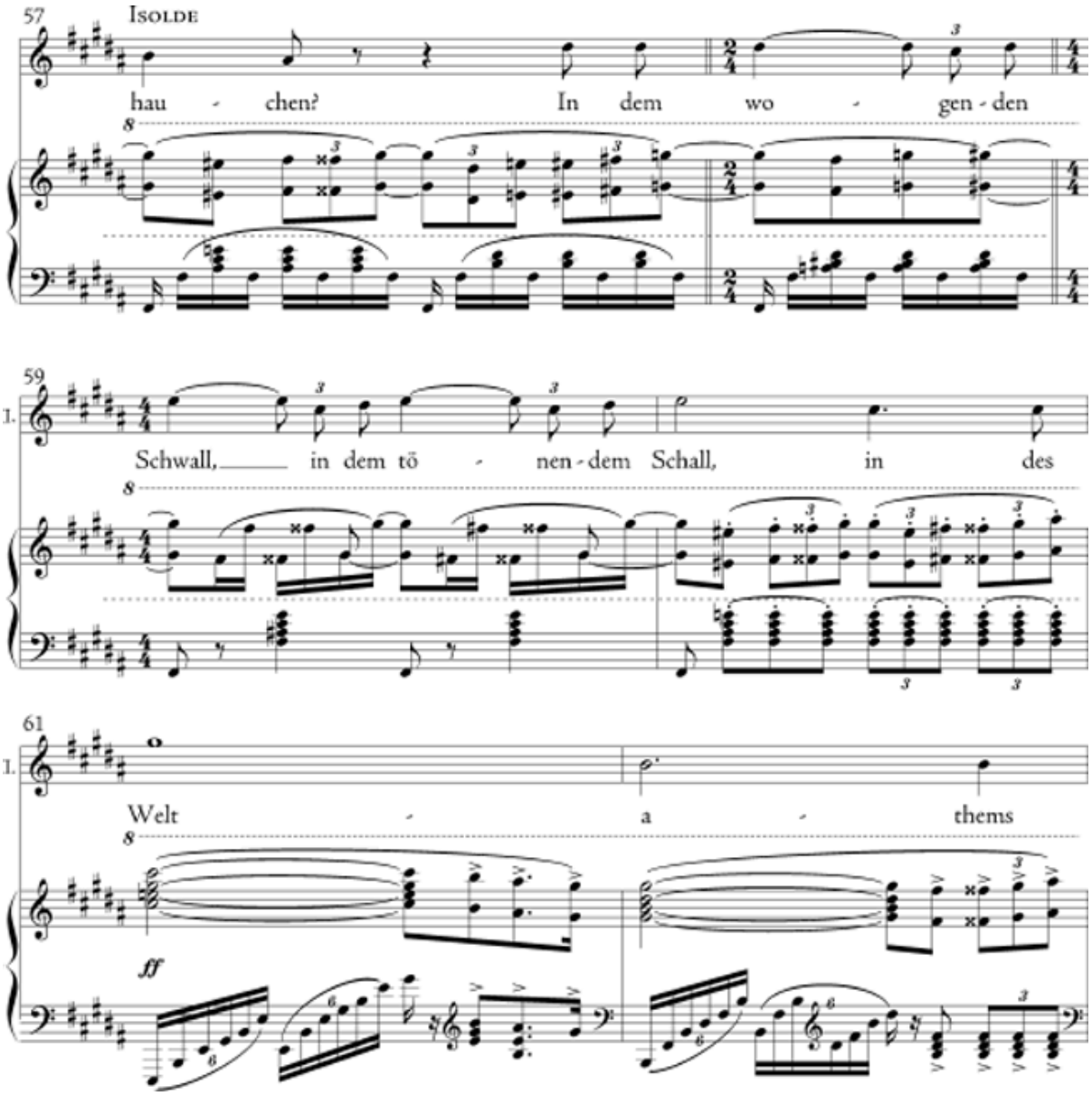


ex. 10-23 Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II, climax of Love Duet ("Tagelied"), mm. 487–515

And then, disaster. Isolde's high B in m. 515, the long-promised triumph of the tonic, is harmonized instead as the seventh in a sadistically grating dominant-ninth chord couched in the most cacophonous voicing imaginable, as King Marke, Isolde's lawfully intended husband, comes rushing onstage with his hunting party—shouting retainers, honking horners, barking dogs, and all. Another deed of music, this time perhaps the cruelest deceptive cadence ever perpetrated, is made visible as the lovers' rapture—not to mention the listeners'—is interrupted on the very point of consummation.

The remainder of the second act is the heart of what some have taken to be the tragedy, others the crisis of a religious drama. Tristan, after first securing Isolde's promise to follow him into "the land where dark night reigns, from which my mother sent me forth," allows himself to be fatally wounded in a duel of honor with one of King Marke's retainers. In the third act, Tristan dies in Isolde's arms and she, contemplating his corpse, undergoes what Wagner calls her *Verklärung* ("Transfiguration," here meaning a spiritual exaltation), as expressed in a final aria that has popularly become known as the *Liebestod* ("Death-by-Love"), the term Wagner actually meant to apply to the Prelude. At its climax she sinks dead into Brangäne's arms, and the curtain falls.

At a glance it is obvious that this climactic seventy-nine-measure solo aria is a truncated recapitulation, in diminished note values, of the 253-measure final section of the act II love duet. For sixty measures the correspondence between the two sections is virtually exact: splice mm. 261–282, 414–459, and 462–514 of the duet together and you get the *Verklärung* through m. 60. But at mm. 61–62 the bloodcurdling deceptive cadence that cut off the duet before its consummation is replaced by a cataclysmic authentic cadence (Ex. 10-24), the most strongly voiced cadence in the entire opera, in which the B-major triad in root position, ardently anticipated but thwarted in act II, is finally allowed to sound forth in glory. At this radiant moment, one may say, Isolde's soul passes irrevocably into “night's wonder-world” where it can join Tristan's, the lovers achieving in that transcendent space the union denied them on the terrestrial plane.


57
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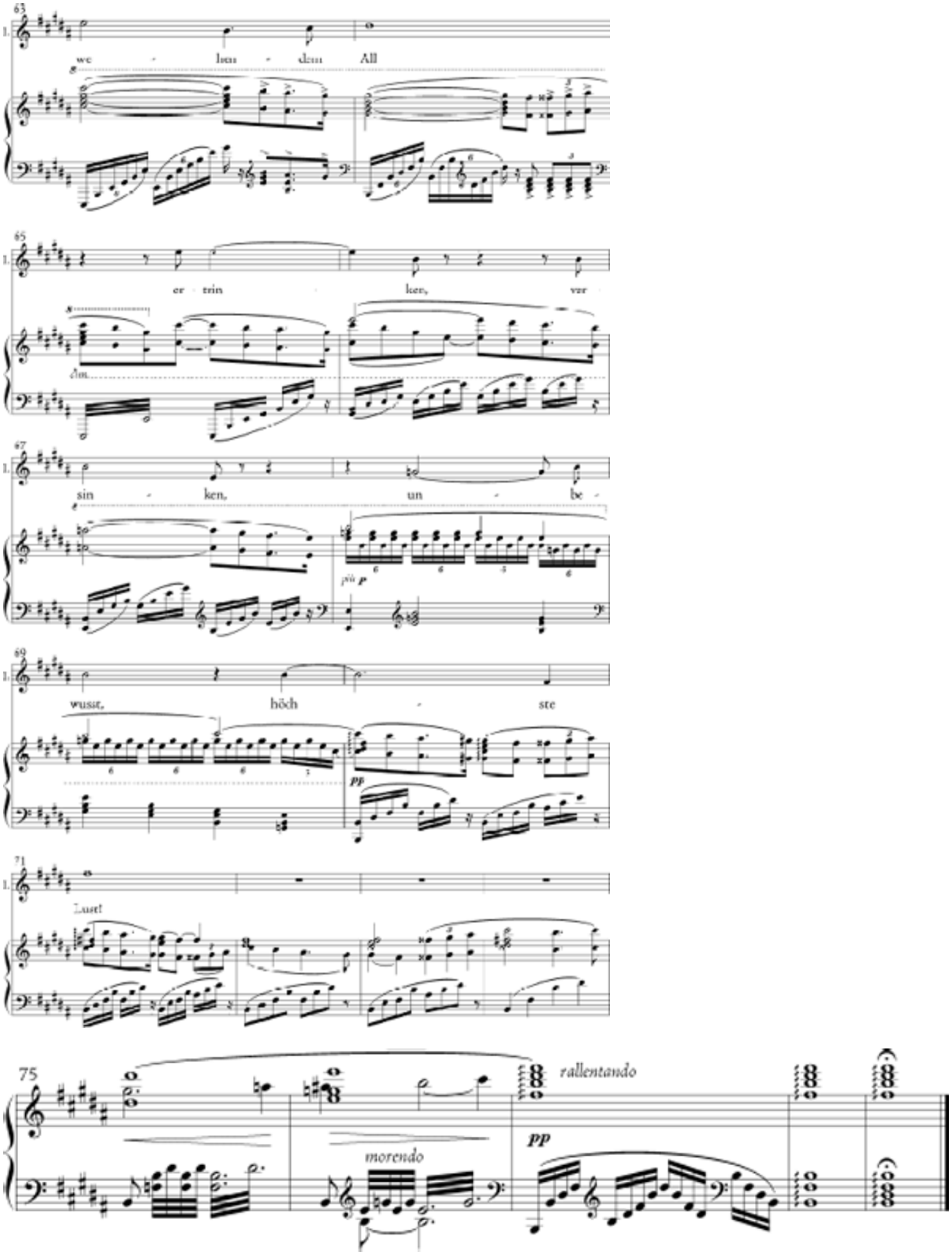

ex. 10-24 Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Isoldes *Vrklärung*

Wagner consolidates the sense of long-postponed consummation by attending in the last five measures of the opera to a bit of unfinished business left over from the first three measures of the Prelude. He allows the original *Tristan*-chord to sound one last time along with its attendant leitmotif, the four-note chromatic ascent. Only this time he replaces the dominant seventh on E with an E-minor triad that can function as the subdominant of B major; and he extends the leitmotif in a pair of oboes, moving through C♯ to D♯, the third of the tonic triad. That D♯—the note that finally resolves the *Tristan*-chord, in the process becoming perhaps the most symbolically fraught single note in all of opera, if not all of music—is given an extraordinary spotlight

when Wagner clears all of the surrounding harmony away (in some cases by notating actual rests, in others by the use of a staccato dot), allowing just the oboes to peep through for a brief instant, immediately before the final chord.

Notes:

(49) *Ibid*., p. 321.

(50) See Heinrich Schenker, *Der Tonwille: Pamphlets in Witness of the Immutable Laws of Music* (1921–1923), trans. and ed. William Drabkin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).