

Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Wagner: Writings

Götterdämmerung

THE SEA OF HARMONY

Chapter: CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Impressively detailed though it may seem, this account of the musical texture of the Norns' scene, far from complete, has not even begun to broach what for Wagner was the main issue. Simply as a medley of twenty-three themes the scene would not even begin to be, in Wagnerian terms, "dramatic." For it would engage only the listener/spectator's cognitive faculties—that is, the faculties of mind that perform the task of recognizing symbols, which is to say the part of the dramatic impression that depends on representation. The purely (or merely) cognitive aspect of Wagner's tissue has often lent itself to satire or outright ridicule. The Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, for example, writing almost a decade after Wagner's death, tried to discredit what he considered the tiresome hypercomplexity of Wagner's "polyphonic fabric" as a "colossal abuse of symbolism":

The listener cannot derive any immediate impression from all these leitmotives as they steal in and out of the contrapuntal web. And in point of fact, if character A, finding himself in a certain mood, were to speak with character B about character C, and if in the accompanying music we hear the contrapuntally interwoven motives A, B and C, perhaps with the addition of a fourth denoting their mood, can one then clearly distinguish such a situation from the reverse: i.e., where C speaks to A about B, or B and C discuss A?³⁹

Rimsky-Korsakov also mocked Wagner's avoidance of set pieces in favor of *unendliche Melodie* (infinite melody)—the seamless, ceaselessly thematic or "developmental" orchestral continuity that swept through entire acts—by comparing the structure of a *Ring* opera to that of an enormous edifice "consisting entirely of a staircase leading from the entrance to the exit."⁴⁰

Such dogged literalism, common in the anti-Wagnerian criticism of the time, can be read as a defense against the aspect of Wagner's music that works not through simple, easily parodied mechanisms of representation, but, far more potently, through direct presentation, bypassing the cognitive and addressing itself directly to the elemental life-driving appetites. That part is the part played by harmonic and tonal progressions—Wagner's "sea of harmony." For a preliminary excursion on the Wagnerian sea we can go briefly back over the Norns' scene, trace its tonal design, and proceed from there into a tonal/thematic overview of the rest of the *Götterdämmerung* Prologue. Putting ourselves in the position of one who has heard no more recent music—in the position, that is, of Wagner's original audience—we will be struck, above all, by the unprecedented range (or "freedom") of modulation, and on occasion by its blinding rapidity. (We will notice long stretches of unaccountably static, "becalmed" harmony as well.) We will be struck by the extreme rarity of full authentic cadences, which occur only at the most decisive moments (in theory, only once per scene); and by the reverse of that coin, the extraordinary abundance and variety of deceptive cadences, some of them prepared by really insistent dominant pedals. And we will be struck by the way these tonal and harmonic effects are geared to the scenic action.

That articulation of the drama through harmony is of course another aspect of the same interpenetration of the musical and the scenic that gave rise to the leitmotif technique. We might be inclined to call the music, in both of these dimensions, the metaphorical parallel to the unfolding drama, a substratum of sound that enriches or intensifies the emotional and cognitive effect of what is seen. Wagner, influenced by the philosophy of Schopenhauer, actually put it just the other way around. In an essay of 1872, "On the Term 'Music Drama,'" he defined this most central concept as consisting of "deeds of music made visible."⁴¹ The *primary* bearer of meaning is the music, and it is the plot or dramatic action that provides the metaphorical parallel, giving cognitive specificity to what is heard. How Wagner could justify such a seemingly paradoxical view will become clearer as we investigate his harmonic procedures and their effects.

The reliance Wagner placed on harmony as the primary shaper of the drama should alert us that however limber and impulsive the modulatory plan may seem in its moment-by-moment (“local”) vagaries, it is always under firm “global” control. That tandem of unpredictable flexibility at the short range and unerring long-range direction is perhaps the most impressive evidence of Wagner the harmonist’s navigational skills.

The *Götterdämmerung* Prologue provides one of the best examples. The opening pair of chords—E \flat and C \flat , derived from the leitmotif of Brünnhilde’s awakening—function in tandem not only as a local succession, but also as a bipolar opposition that gives shape to the whole Norns’ scene (or more pertinently, that delineates its entropy, its degeneration into chaos). At a higher level yet, the tonalities of which the two chords are the tonics—conceived, like Schubert’s tonalities (see chapter 2), as freely encompassing the parallel major and minor—serve to close the Prologue (in E \flat major) and to open the dark scene of plotting that follows (in B [=C \flat] minor; see Ex. 10-8). In between stretches the lengthy orchestral entr’acte known as *Siegfrieds Rheinfahrt* (“Siegfried’s Rhine journey”) when it is performed as a concert piece. The character’s navigation of the great waterway here serves quite explicitly as the conceptual metaphor for a musical process.



fig. 10-10 Alois Burgstaller (1871–1945) as Siegfried at Bayreuth, 1900.

635 Ziemlich rasch

ff

tr

3

ex. 10-8a Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, leitmotives labeled as in Ex. 10-2, mm. 635–39

The three great strophes of the Norns' ballad-narrative enact in harmony the fatal entropy that Wotan's sin has brought upon the world. The first strophe, sung by the First Norn, begins in a firmly established E \flat major/minor, and ends quite "classically" in the same key. In between, C \flat , cadentially established and then enharmonically transformed to B, provides (again "classically") a contrasting middle section that meanders back via an enharmonic reversal involving the transformation of E major (next after B on the circle of fifths) to F \flat , coinciding with the *Götterdämmerung* leitmotif (Ex. 10-2k), which always expresses the Neapolitan \flat II.

The Second Norn begins her strophe with a cadence to C minor, preparing the perfectly conventional key of the relative minor. The harmonic motion is brusquely interrupted to illustrate Siegfried's destruction of Wotan's spear, but again the *Götterdämmerung* leitmotif appears as a Neapolitan to guide the strophe back to a conventional close.

It is the Third Norn, who sees the future, who plays havoc with harmonic closure, opening up the sluices and letting in the sea. With her the *Götterdämmerung* leitmotif serves not to guide the harmony back but to lead it astray, for its D \flat tonality functions this time not as \flat II but as I, and the C-minor cadence that it prepares is trumped by the baleful half-diminished F–A \flat –C \flat –E \flat harmony that had previously closed the Norns' refrain. That harmony, of course, can function as II $_7$ in E \flat minor, and so it might seem to promise return to the ballad narrative's original key.

The image shows a musical score for Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, Act I, scene 1, measures 1-11. The score is in 3/4 time and D minor. It features a vocal line for Gunther and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Gemächliches Zeitmass Nun hör', Ha - gen; sa - ge mir, Held: sitz' ich herr - lich am Rhein, Gun - ther". The piano part includes dynamics like *p*, *cresc.*, *poco f*, and *tr*.

ex. 10-8b Richard Wagner, *Götterdämmerung*, Act I, scene 1, mm. 1–11

Instead, however, it is put through a threefold sequence by ascending minor thirds (compare mm. 161, 163, and 165 in Ex. 10-9), that lands it a tritone away from its starting point, on a B that no longer functions as a stable substitute for C \flat but points ahead (as II₇) to an A minor that never comes, even though its dominant is prominently displayed in m. 175. Instead, the expected A minor is preempted by a magniloquent cadential gesture toward C \sharp (m. 177, coinciding with the Valhalla leitmotif), which is itself preempted in the next measure by a Neapolitan (the *Götterdämmerung* motif once more), which is likewise preempted in m. 180 by the Omen tattoo on B \flat , functioning here (or so it seems) as a deceptive cadence in D minor. All of these progressions may be traced by analyzing Ex. 10-9, which then hooks up with Ex. 10-6.

158 3. NORN

Sip - pe sitzt dort Wo - tan im Saal.

cresc. *poco f* *dim.* *p*

161

N. Ge - han' ner Schei - te ho - he Schicht ragt zu

p *p*

163

N. Hauf rings um die Hal - le:

p *p*

245 3. NORN
Welt - e - sche zu Hauf ge - schich - te - te Schei - te.

248 2. NORN
Wollt ihr wiss - en wie das wird?

arpeggiando
pp (mit Paukenwirbel auf B
(una corda)

ppp

ex. 10-10 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, leitmotives labeled (on first occurrence only) as in Ex. 10-2, mm. 245–54

Or again, the appearance of the Rhine Gold motif near the end of Ex. 10-7 strongly expresses the dominant of E ♭ (the key, incidentally, that witnessed the birth of the Rhine itself at the very beginning of the cycle); but again delaying measures (involving other leitmotives) rob the cadence of its urgency, and by the time E ♭ arrives in the bass, the chord it supports has the character of a dominant, not a tonic. The one succession that could be read as containing immediate progression of dominant to tonic in E ♭ (see the fifth measure of Ex. 10-7) happens in the middle of a harmonic sequence, again involving the Oblivion motif, in which E ♭ is only an incident in a continuing circle of descending major thirds (G–E ♭–C ♭).

The next long pedal—the F ♯ that so dissonantly accompanies the Curse motif when the rope of fate comes undone—turns out (most unexpectedly or even incoherently in the short run, most logically in the long) to be the effective dominant. It picks up the full dominant-seventh harmony at the very moment of the Norns' disappearance (Dawn) and it is resumed at the end of Siegfried's Rhine Journey, where it is finally resolved, at the beginning of the first scene of act I proper (Ex. 10-8b), to the B minor that has been so long and so threateningly prefigured—so threateningly as to rupture the Norns' skein of destiny! Thus the F ♯ of Alberich's curse, in the form of a functional dominant pedal, encloses the Prologue's entire second scene, which depicts the awakening of Siegfried and Brünnhilde after their night of bliss, and their ardent farewells as Siegfried embarks on his ill-fated quest "Zu neuen Thaten" ("On to new deeds!"), to quote Brünnhilde's famous first line. The whole ecstatic scene is played against the curse-pedal's implicitly continuous rumble—a constant baneful subtext to the outwardly ebullient action.

To introduce that ebullient action the pedal is temporarily liquidated by reinterpreting its harmony as an augmented (German) sixth chord—signaled or symbolized in the notation by respelling it as a G ♭ (m. 318)—and resolved downward to the dominant of B ♭ major, in which key one of the most important leitmotives in *Götterdämmerung* makes its first appearance (m. 327): a mellow but mighty brass chorale, first given out by a choir of eight horns, obviously derived from the tune of the young Siegfried's horn call (Ex. 10-2v), which now denotes Siegfried the Hero, or (per Wolzogen) "Siegfried, transformed by love." It is answered immediately by a pair of clarinets (one a gorgeously throaty bass clarinet), sounding the leitmotif denoting Brünnhilde, similarly transformed (Ex. 10-11). A surging orchestral crescendo, carried by a rising sequence of Brünnhilde motifs, and accompanying a

light show that depicts the sunrise, leads to a great blaze of a seemingly recovered E ♭ major to greet the lovers' appearance onstage.

ex. 10-11 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, mm. 315–34

This, of course, is the key the Norns “lost” in the Prologue's first scene. Its restitution takes place, however, in a harmonic environment that has been fatally compromised by feints and deceptions of all kinds. In Wagner's ripest style, any dominant seventh can resolve as an augmented sixth (and vice versa); any major triad in first inversion can resolve as a Neapolitan, and chords prepared as Neapolitans can resolve as primary functions. Any tone can act as a common tone to create instant—if illusory, temporary—links between chords that are remotely placed along the circle of fifths, the traditional arbiter of harmonic relatedness.


A strategically placed chord or a tremulous pedal can cause a key to heave up before the contemplating ear like an iceberg in the path of the Titanic; and the key so drastically prefigured can be “liquidated” (to use a term Arnold Schoenberg invented for the process a generation later) before any of its primary functions have been asserted. Indeed, there is a whole category of leitmotives (Fate and Oblivion, to recall two) that seem to have no other purpose than the securing of these effects—effects that resonate insidiously with their dramatic import.

So by now, a great flare-up of a long-awaited tonality like the present E ♭ can be accepted as no more than provisionally decisive or conclusive. We can no longer trust harmonic functions to deliver, as once in Beethoven's time they did, on their *promesse du bonheur*, the “promise of happiness” that the French novelist Stendhal named as the most essential aspect of artistic beauty and the reason why art is cherished.⁴² We feel ourselves buffeted by that loss of certainty more deeply than a theory of representation can ever explain, for here we come to the nub of what makes the Wagnerian “sea of harmony” so much more than a metaphor or a representation.

Not that Wagnerian harmonies no longer have representational or symbolic value. They have that, too, as we have certainly seen. Not only chords and chord progressions but actual keys can be symbols: witness all-important E ♭ itself, the key of the river Rhine, and by extension the harbinger of the bliss of primeval nature whence all has sprung and whither all is fated to return. Its dissolution (through modulatory progressions) in the Norns' scene is obviously a representation of entropy's onset. The half-

diminished F–A ♭ –C ♭ –E ♭ harmony (the single most potent modulatory agent) is emblematic of destruction. And so on. But there is more.

Notes:

(39) Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, "Wagner: Sovokupnoye proizvedeniye dvukh iskusstv; ili, Muzikal'naya drama," *Polnoye sobraniy sochineniy Literaturniye proizvedeniya i perepiska* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1963), p. 54. 

(40) *Ibid.*, p. 57. 

(41) *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Vol. V, trans. W. Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1896), p. 303.

(42) Marie Henri Beyle (pseudo. Stendhal), "De l'amour" (1822), Bk. I, Chap. 23.

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