# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Tristan und Isolde

'Tristan' chord

# THE ULTIMATE EXPERIENCE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)
**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
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The articulation of the drama through musical analogues—Wagner, of course, would have called it the articulation of the music through dramatic analogues—and its uncanny psychological potency are perhaps sufficiently illustrated by the *Götterdämmerung* Prologue. We will not have room for another musico-dramatic exploration so detailed. But one more Wagnerian experience needs to be sampled if we are to have an idea of the composer's accomplishment adequate to its historical resonance, because its repercussions will be felt on virtually every subsequent page of this book. Though *Götterdämmerung*, the culminating work in the *Ring cycle*, could be fairly described as Wagner's crowning achievement, bringing to consummation as it did the largest musical entity ever conceived within the European literate tradition, it is not his emblematic work. That distinction belongs to *Tristan und Isolde*, completed (between the second and third acts of *Siegfried*, as it were) in 1859.

What makes *Tristan* the extreme or limiting case, and a touchstone for all subsequent music-making and music-thinking, has to do with its subject matter—a tragic love story adapted from a famous medieval poem and treated on a typically monumental, archetypal scale—but even more with the relationship between its "deeds of music" and the responses they have elicited. If, as the British philosopher Bryan Magee suggests, Wagner's music "is both loved and hated more immoderately than that of any other composer,"[47] the same is true *a fortiori of Tristan* among his works.

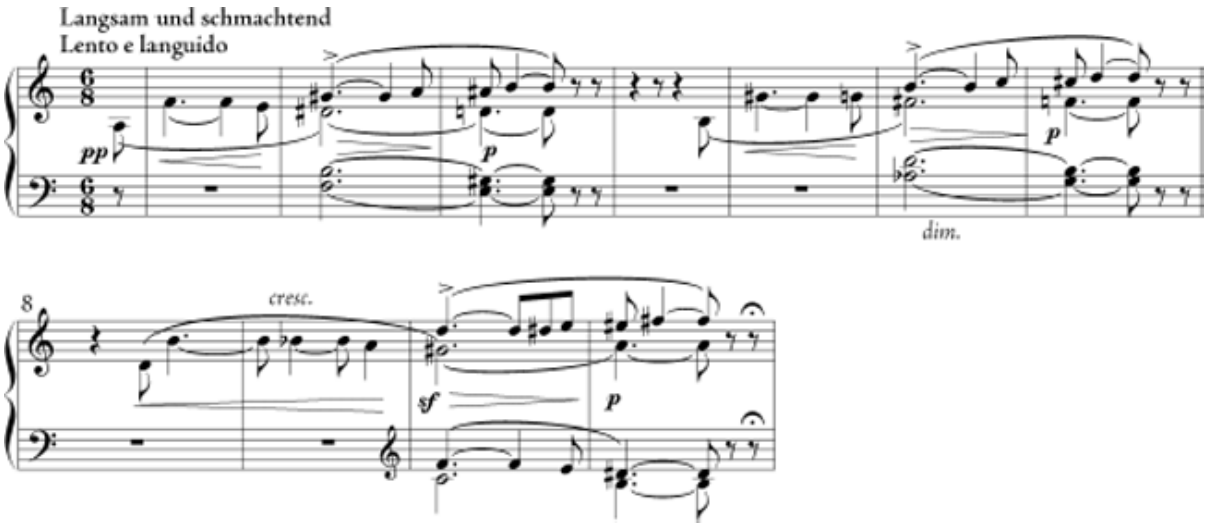
**fig. 10-12 Lillian Nordica (1857–1914) as Isolde, ca. 1900.**

The balance we have observed in *Götterdämmerung* between its cognitive symbolism and its precognitive or subliminal modes of signifying—between the *representational* as embodied in the leitmotives and the directly *presentational* as embodied in the sea of harmony—is drastically skewed in *Tristan* in favor of the latter. Where *Götterdämmerung* powerfully enacts a complex story, *Tristan* powerfully projects a sustained feeling. But in fact they are not equally powerful. If *Tristan* shows anything it shows that, unless protected, our minds (or the rational part of our minds, at any rate, the part that understands and interprets stories) must give way before our feelings, and that music—"tonal" music, Wagner's music—is their most powerful catalyst on earth.

The story is negligible: a man and a woman are seized with a forbidden love (act I); they attempt to act upon it but are forcibly separated, the man being mortally wounded in the process (act II); the man dies and the bereft woman, overwhelmed at the sight of his corpse, dies in sympathy (act III). In a program note he published around 1860, meant to elucidate the content of the work as embodied in its Prelude five years before the first performance of the whole opera, Wagner reduced the story quite graphically to the feeling it symbolized, a feeling to which only music—his music—could do full artistic justice: "Suddenly aflame," he wrote,

> they must confess they belong only to each other. No end, now, to the yearning, the desire, the bliss, the suffering of love: world, power, fame, splendor, honor, knighthood, loyalty, friendship—all scattered like an empty dream; one thing alone still living: yearning, yearning, unquenchable, ever-regenerated longing—languishing, thirsting; the only redemption—death, extinction, eternal sleep![48]

And here is the musical equivalent of the condition Wagner describes—or rather, the "deed of music" to which not only Wagner's description but the entire opera forms a "visible" outer garment (Ex. 10-16). The first three measures of the *Tristan* Prelude constitute perhaps the most famous, surely the most commented-on, single phrase of music ever written.




**ex. 10-16 Richard Wagner, Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, mm. 1–11**

Long singled out for extensive glossing in its own right is the dissonant first harmony, so distinctive and seemingly unprecedented that it has been christened the "*Tristan*-chord." Its quality as sheer aural sensation is much enhanced by the mixture of orchestral colors in which it is clothed; and this in turn is the result of its being the point of confluence between two leitmotives that later function independently: the rising sixth with conjunct chromatic "recovery" in the cellos, and the rising chromatic tetrachord in the oboe, accompanied by (predominantly) other double reeds.

A closer look, however, shows the *Tristan*-chord (as sheer sound, anyway) to be nothing new. In fact it is a harmony that has already figured prominently in this very chapter, albeit spelled F–A ♭ –C ♭ –E ♭ and functioning as the supertonic of E ♭ In that guise it was the Norns' horror chord. In its new tonal context, that of A minor, it is famed as the chord of love's unquenchable desire. In musical semiosis (or "signing"), as in real estate, location is everything.

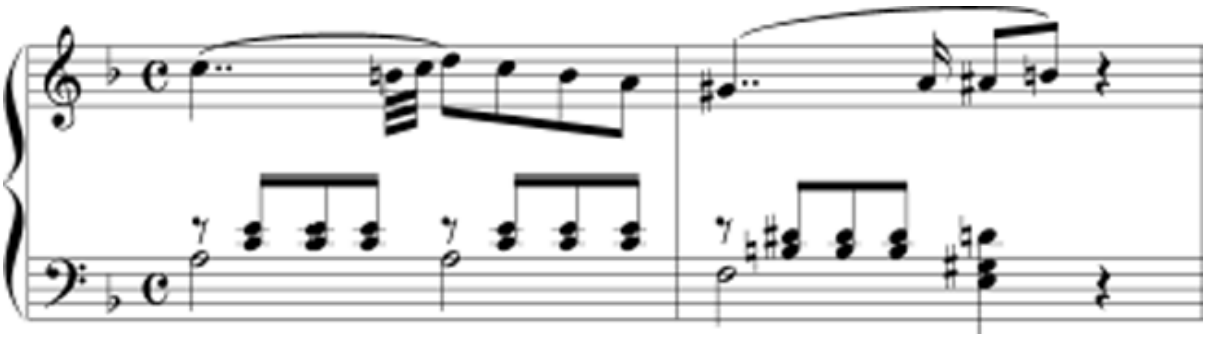
But what is its function in A minor, and how do we even know that A minor is the key in which it is functioning? True, the first note is *A*, but there are no A minor triads in the vicinity. Indeed, there is no simple triad of any kind until m. 17, and the triad that finally appears there is F major. The blank key signature, given the chromatic (or in any case "chromaticized") context, could merely be the absence of a key signature. If a key must be named, why not C major?

And yet if our experience with Wagner's sea of harmony has taught us anything, it has taught us to expect keys not to assert themselves explicitly but to loom. And what makes a key loom is not the tonic, which cannot identify itself as such without a cadence, but the dominant, which carries the implicit promise of that cadence within it. The end of the first phrase of the *Tristan* prelude is not only in terms of its intervallic structure (its "sound quality"), but also in terms of its preparation, the unambiguous dominant of A minor. The chord that fills the ensuing silence in the listeners' inner ear, assuming that they have any experience at all with tonal harmony, is the unstated—indeed, never to be stated, and ultimately needless to be stated—tonic of that key.

So the *Tristan*-chord, which so clearly (though only in retrospect) performs the function of a "pre-dominant" in A minor, must be interpreted as having *F* as its root—but an F that seeks resolution not along the circle of fifths (as it would—and has!—in E ♭ ) but by semitonal descent to the dominant, since its degree function is VI. The spelling of the chord, in which F and D ♯ coexist, is thus revealed to be quite traditional, since it is on the minor sixth degree that augmented-sixth chords have been occurring ever

since there has been such a thing. What makes the *Tristan*-chord unusual, then, and deserving of a name after all, is the fact that its "half-diminished" quality is the result of its containing a long, accented appoggiatura (G♯), which on its resolution to A clarifies the nature and function of the chord as a French sixth in A minor, resolving normally to the dominant.

This, too, is something that Wagner fastidiously prepares us to observe, if only in retrospect. The F on the first downbeat is a retrospectively recognizable appoggiatura to E, and the nature of the A♯ in m. 3 as a chromatic passing tone is self-evident. (Nobody, it seems, has ever heard the downbeat sonority of m. 3, which could be read as another French sixth, as another sort of *Tristan*-chord.) Thus all three downbeats are dominated melodically by accented nonharmonic tones. Their restlessness contributes tellingly to the affect of unfulfilled desire that Wagner described in his program note, but that we surely need no program note to detect. That restlessness, it should be emphasized, occurs within a fully operational (and fully "normal") tonal context, one that Wagner shared, say, with Mozart (compare Ex. 10-17, offered with apologies). Only against a background of normality, after all, with its implied promise of repose, could such a restlessness be evoked.



**ex. 10-17 *Tristan*-chord conflated with the theme of Mozart's Fantasia in D minor, K. 397**

The affect is palpable—and *immanent*, rather than merely symbolized—in the unresolved dominant seventh in m. 3. And it is made even more oppressively palpable in the sequential repetitions of the opening phrase (as given in Ex. 10-16). Each phrase of the continuation begins with cello notes drawn from the dominant harmony previously left hanging, and proceeds through a *Tristan*-chord to a new dominant to be similarly left ringing, unconsummated, in the air. The affect of the third phrase is intensified and prolonged, in fact, in a manner that may be fairly described as sadistic: its harmonized portion is repeated after a fermata that extends the agony of incompletion, and after another similarly agonizing fermata the last two melody notes are repeated—and repeated again at the octave to rub it in—then reharmonized with the hanging dominant from m. 3, only to resolve, appallingly, in a deceptive cadence supporting yet another accented appoggiatura.

Any listener who by now is not feeling "yearning, yearning, unquenchable, ever-regenerated longing—languishing, thirsting," et cetera, has simply never learned to respond to the syntax of tonal music. For such a listener a program note will be of no assistance. For those capable of responding, explanation is superfluous.

So it is quite misleading to say that it is merely the first phrase of *Tristan und Isolde* that has excited so much comment, even if it is usually quoted (as in Ex. 10-16) and analyzed all by itself. To understand its fascination one must observe it in context, a context of unresolved dominant tension that lasts throughout the Prelude, sustained by Wagner's unprecedented skill in the arts of transition and feint, and that is revived and intensified at various points in the opera until it is at last cataclysmically discharged at the very end of the final act. These are the aspects of *Tristan und Isolde* that have made it a technical tour de force, an esthetic watershed, and even a moral touchstone, and that urgently demand our attention.

## Notes:

(47) Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 270. 

(48) Richard Wagner, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Dichtungen* (Leipzig, 1895), pp. 163–64; trans. Piero Weiss in P. Weiss and R. Taruskin, *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, 2nd ed., p. 320. 