

Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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STALEMATE AND SUBVERSION

Chapter: CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The most radically “realistic” harmonic effect of all is the one with which the scene opens, already quoted in Ex. 10-20 for comparison with Wagner’s harmony. The stage direction specifies a “solemn peal of bells,” and that is what the lengthy orchestral prelude depicts. It consists of just two chords, both of them describable in common-practice terms as dominant-sevenths with their roots on A \flat and D respectively. The common practice description is quite misleading, however, since neither of them ever resolves to the implied tonic (respectively D \flat and G). Nor, once their oscillation really gets going, do we even expect them to do so; for the oscillation emphasizes another relationship, namely their shared tritone (C and F \sharp G \flat). The two tritones, the one they share and the one their roots describe, arrest or neutralize their functional tendency.

It is not difficult to trace this progression, in concept, back to its source in Liszt’s experiments with circles of major and minor thirds (see chapter 8). A tritone, after all, is equivalent to two minor thirds; Musorgsky’s progression could be viewed as a sampling from the Lisztian one. As a matter of fact, Liszt’s *Orpheus* (Symphonic Poem No. 4, 1854) begins with the very progression Musorgsky has borrowed: a dominant seventh on E \flat , drawn out long by means of the “title character’s” harp arpeggios, followed by one on A (Ex. 12-4). Liszt follows this opening pair, however, with another dominant seventh on C, as if splitting the difference between the opening pair, and maintaining a forward-moving harmonic drive.

Andante moderato

The image displays five systems of musical notation for Franz Liszt's 'Orpheus' opening. The tempo is marked 'Andante moderato'. The first system shows a piano (p) dynamic in the right hand and a forte (f) dynamic in the left hand. The second system features a large slur over the right hand. The third system includes a triplet in the left hand and a piano (p) dynamic in the right hand. The fourth system shows a large slur over the right hand. The fifth system features a triplet in the right hand and a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The notation includes various musical symbols such as slurs, triplets, and dynamics.

ex. 12-4 Franz Liszt, *Orpheus*, opening

Musorgsky's progression produces no motion forward, but a stalemate. He shapes the passage in which it occurs by rhythmic rather than harmonic means: at first by surface diminutions, then by doubling the harmonic rhythm, both of them devices actually copied from bell-ringing techniques. Then the whole thing is repeated with the position of the two chords reversed (but since they are functionally undifferentiated, their reversed positions make no difference to the character of the progression and can easily pass unnoticed by the listener). All he can do to bring the second passage to an end is drawn it out with the heavy percussion. There is no possible functional cadence.

And that is why Musorgsky's progression, though much simpler in concept than the famous opening of *Tristan und Isolde*, was in fact far more subversive of tonal practice than Wagner's (just as Liszt's practice, as noted in chapter 10, was potentially more "radical" than his son-in-law's). However ingenious and sophisticated Wagner's usage (and there is no denying that Wagner gave his innovatory idea far more resourceful and sophisticated treatment than Musorgsky could hope to do), it remained within the system of functional relations. Musorgsky's was at the limits of the system, and perhaps beyond it. In the years to come, younger Russian composers would build on Musorgsky's idea in such a way as to circumvent major/minor tonality altogether. In that way, Russia did succeed in "breaking free of Europe," and later exerting a satisfying counter-influence on "the West."

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