

## 4. Wagner

### Prelude to Tristan und Isolde

(For Unit 6: Developing Musical Understanding)

#### Background information and performance circumstances

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was the greatest exponent of mid-nineteenth-century German romanticism. Like some other leading nineteenth-century musicians, but unlike those from previous eras, he was never a professional instrumentalist or singer, but worked as a freelance composer and conductor. A genius of over-riding force and ambition, he created a new genre of 'music drama' and greatly expanded the expressive possibilities of tonal composition. His works divided musical opinion, and strongly influenced several generations of composers across Europe.

#### Career

Brought up in a family with wide and somewhat Bohemian artistic connections, Wagner was discouraged by his mother from studying music, and at first was drawn more to literature – a source of inspiration he shared with many other romantic composers. It was only at the age of 15 that he began a secret study of harmony, working from a German translation of Logier's *School of Thoroughbass*. [A reprint of this book is available on the Internet - <http://archive.org/details/logierscomprehen00logi>. The approach to basic harmony, remarkably, is very much the same as we use today.] Eventually he took private composition lessons, completing four years of study in 1832. Meanwhile his impatience with formal training and his obsessive attention to what interested him led to a succession of disasters over his education in Leipzig, successively at St Nicholas' School, St Thomas' School (where Bach had been cantor), and the university.

At the age of 15, Wagner had written a full-length tragedy, and in 1832 he wrote the libretto to his first opera. He was to write the libretti for all his subsequent works. Between 1832 and 1848 he worked as a conductor in various opera houses, and composed his early operas – *Rienzi*, *Der Fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. In 1848 he was involved in the revolution in Dresden. A warrant was issued for his arrest, which could have led to his trial and execution. He managed to escape to Switzerland and lived as an exile for the next twelve years. Meanwhile he started work on the *Ring of the Nibelung*, a colossal project of four operas on a single theme, which was to occupy him for the next twenty-five years. In the midst of this project, he broke off to write two independent and contrasting works – *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. *Tristan und Isolde* was completed in 1859. A projected performance in Vienna in 1860 was cancelled; the first performance was given in 1865 in the Hoftheater (court theatre) at Munich, conducted by Hans von Bülow.

Wagner had already begun a notorious affair with von Bülow's wife, Cosima, the illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt. Following the von Bülows' divorce and the death of Wagner's first wife, Minna, he and Cosima were married in 1870.

#### Prose writings

As well as composing, Wagner was a prolific writer of books and articles in which he worked out, advertised and defended his radical ideas about art and society. As a result

of a highly regrettable polemic against Jewish composers, published in 1850 (together with a disclaimer from the editors) in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (New Music Journal), he was later taken up by the Nazi party as their musical representative. His music is still effectively, if unofficially, banned in Israel.

### **Music drama**

Wagner's conception of music drama was inspired by Beethoven's 9th symphony – orchestral music, and specifically (as Wagner saw it) German music, that burst out of its limits to include the voice. The stage works that Wagner envisaged were not operas in the standard mould of the day. In Wagner, the orchestra is not merely the accompaniment, but a principal protagonist, carrying its own musical argument. From the first, his work was controversial. Opera-goers were not used to themes from distant Nordic mythology; some, including serious professional musicians, were upset by the musical freedoms of the 'new German style', proclaimed as the 'music of the future' by Wagner and his friend and fellow composer Liszt; audiences looking for entertainment listened in vain for conventional 'tunes' in the expressive recitative of his vocal writing and the symphonic paragraphs of his orchestra.

Supported by enthusiasts such as the young King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who put up huge sums to meet Wagner's debts and ambitions, and in the face of vociferous criticism, he not only completed his vast composition project, but commissioned 'Wagner tubas' to reinforce the orchestra, educated singers in his monumental demands, and designed and built a new theatre at Bayreuth, since in his view no existing theatre could do justice to his works. Performances of his works are still given every year in the Bayreuth Festival Theatre.

## **Performing forces and their handling**

In the Prelude Wagner writes for a large orchestra including:

- Triple woodwind including cor anglais and bass clarinet. The timbres of these two instruments are essential to the orchestral colouring and they have important solos, not least in bars 100-105. Wagner gives extremely precise directions as to when woodwind parts are to be doubled. The bass clarinet and third bassoon often join the double basses to colour and strengthen the bass line (see note on cellos below).
- A full brass section with 4 horns (2 in F and 2 in E), 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba. In the Prelude, Wagner uses the brass with subtlety and restraint. Trombones and tuba are used in only 18 of the 111 bars, and even then they only play together in three bars (74, 81, 83). Trumpets are reserved for three climactic bars (81-83) when trumpet 1 carries motif 'b' (see below) against the full weight of an orchestral tutti. Trumpet 2 joins for a single fortissimo note. The horns, on the other hand, are active more than half the time and play a versatile role, joining forces with both woodwind and string sections.
- Timpani. There is no unpitched percussion. As with the brass, Wagner is careful with the drums. They reinforce the climax, but even more importantly fill the 'silences' at the end of the Prelude with a sinister undertone.
- Strings. The cellos are largely freed from their earlier role as foundation instruments, and play the part of a romantic tenor voice. Wagner also uses the plangent tone of the violas to take the melody, e.g. in bars 42 and 92. Unusually, in bar 98 they are higher than the violins; in bar 42, they are actually doubled an octave lower by violin II.

Wagner's orchestration is inseparable from the content of the music; the timbre of a phrase – often a changing timbre – is an essential part of its expression. Orchestral textures in the Prelude range from the chamber-music delicacy of four solo wind instruments or divided strings (bars 36-42) to the one bar (83) that is truly *tutti*. Between these extremes, his use of the instruments responds constantly to the melodic, harmonic and dynamic content of the phrase. As an example, consider bars 25-36<sup>1</sup>.

In bars 25-31:

- Melody on the cellos in the upper register (using tenor clef) with 4-part string accompaniment and bass clarinet doubling string bass.
- Bassoons join basses in bar 28 to reinforce the crescendo to sforzando.
- The forte/sforzando chord at bar 29 is reinforced by cor anglais and horns. Violin II and viola end their phrase with a short chord, thickened by double-stopping, and then have rests, while the chord dies away on the woodwind and horns.
- Violin I takes over melody from cellos in bar 28 whilst cellos drop to double the melody an octave lower.
- In bar 30 violin II and viola introduce a counter-melody, also in octaves, leading to a chord in bar 31 treated in the same way as bar 29.

Bars 32-36<sup>1</sup>

- Violin II and viola re-enter in octaves, dove-tailing with the end of the violin/cello phrase.
- Double bass with bassoon 3 now on bass line.
- New melody enters in octaves on oboe, clarinets and horn 1.
- Build-up towards forte in successive bars: bassoons 1 and 2 in unison (bar 33), bass clarinet, doubling a double bass note half way through (bar 34), horns 3 and 4, cor anglais and horn 2 at different points during bar 35.
- Strings drop out at the peak of the crescendo (bar 35), again leaving woodwind and horns to complete the phrase.

### **Instrumental techniques**

The score is marked in great detail with dynamics and performance directions in a mixture of Italian and German. (*Langsam und schmachtend*: [slowly and in a languishing manner]; *zart*: [tenderly]; *belebend/belebt*: [more lively].)

Among instrumental techniques (always used, like the orchestration, for expression rather than display) we can notice that:

- On individual chords, strings play pizzicato to add accent and thicken the texture with double stopping– sometimes both at the same time (bar 16).
- In melodic passages strings are sometimes divided (German *geteilt*, abbreviated as *get.* in the score – e.g. bar 36).
- Violins are marked 'sul G' (play on the G string), to take advantage of the particular tone colour of the violin's lowest string (e.g. bars 22-23).
- Tremolando is used in the violas in bars 77-83 and in the double basses in bar 83 only.

## Melody

Whatever his critics may have said, melody – ‘endless melody’, as he described it – was at the heart of Wagner’s theories. His melodies in the Prelude are both precisely delineated and highly flexible in their development.

### Leitmotiv

A leitmotiv (also spelled leitmotif) in opera is a recurrent musical phrase particularly associated with a character, object or idea. Wagner introduced the systematic use of leitmotifs (the plural in German is correctly *Leitmotive*) as a principle of musical and dramatic organisation. Though Wagner did not label them as such, it has become customary to assign descriptive tags to individual motifs, if only for reference purposes. In the case of this work, the motifs are closely related, and reappear, often modified, throughout the Prelude and at crucial moments during all three acts of the drama. Far from being an optional trailer with snatches of the best tunes in the show, the overture is the true beginning of the drama - the musical and emotional seed from which it will grow.

- The opening phrase contains two fragmentary motifs, on the cello and oboe 1 respectively. The ‘Tristan’ chord occurs at the point where they collide.
- Motif ‘a’ (The ‘Grief’ motif) rises by a minor sixth (sometimes a major sixth) and then falls chromatically. Motif ‘b’ (‘Desire’) consists of a chromatic rise of four notes.



- The phrases starting in bars 4 and 8 begin an octave below the last melody note of the previous phrase, and leap a sixth within the previous chord, thus ensuring an impression of continuity.
- The melody that appears at bar 17 (The ‘Glance’ motif) is different in character from these two motifs. Its opening phrase is a varied retrograde of motif ‘a’; however, it is not chromatic. It begins with three rising notes in a characteristic dotted rhythm, followed by an expressive minor seventh fall, and has an internal structure that readily identifies it – two loosely sequential phrases followed by a swooping extension containing the widest adjacent leaps in the Prelude (a perfect fifth and minor seventh).



- Some melodies recur but are varied on each appearance. For example, the ‘Glance’ motif is shortened at 32-36 but extended at 74-81. Phrase ‘a’ is given a retrograde continuation at 84-5.

- The 'Love potion' motif reverses the elements of the 'Glance' motif, beginning sequentially, but falling instead.



- The build-up in bars 78-80 is achieved by rhythmic diminution of phrase 'b', together with the dotted rhythm from the 'Glance' motif.
- Motifs typically recur at their original pitch (or more precisely in their original 'pitch class' – i.e. notes of the same name, regardless of their octave). Thus the pitch as well as the melody itself becomes a point of reference. For example: melody 'c' in bars 17, 32, 74; and melody 'd' at 25 and 45. Melodies 'a' and 'b' return at their original pitch (except for the opening note of 'a') in bars 82-3 and 100-101. Bars 68-74 are a compressed version of the whole of bars 1-17 with the melodies at their original pitch.
- The final unaccompanied octaves in cello and bass (106-110) outline a melodic version of the 'Tristan' chord within the key of C minor before settling onto its dominant, G.

## Structure

The Prelude follows no conventional formal structure. To do so could have compromised its function as an integral and open-ended introduction to the opera. It relies for its comprehensibility on intense motivic working and an evolving emotional contour that is stronger than any sense of predetermined design. There are suggestions of ternary form:

- The 'Love potion' motif might be considered as belonging to a 'B' section as it has its own tonality (E major) and only appears during the central part of the Prelude (bars 25-26 and 45-48). Bars 23-24 have the character of a bridge passage.
- Bars 66-83 can be seen as a climactic recapitulation of bars 1-22.
- The broken phrases from bar 84 suggest a coda; they recall the opening 17 bars in melodic content, quiet dynamics and fragmented texture; they also include references to bars 23-4 and 36-9; but they are darkened by the C minor tonality.

Locally, Wagner uses a number of structural devices to make the forward shaping of the music clear:

- Melodic sequence e.g. the opening, bars 25-28, 36-39, 53-4, 78-9.
- Repetition (e.g. bars 36-37, where the echo of strings by the wind an octave higher recalls similar effects in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony).
- Gradual shortening of phrases e.g. bars 8-15, where the phrase is gradually reduced to its last two notes. (Again, a method favoured by Beethoven.)
- Diminution (bars 77-80, anticipated at bar 23).

## Harmony

It is no exaggeration to say that *Tristan und Isolde* changed the harmonic landscape of Europe. It did so within the basic principles of functional harmony – the system in which the dominant chord, and a few equivalents, lead towards the tonic – but instead of using the dominant to underline the stability of the arrival at the tonic, Wagner prolonged the tension as the dominant chord awaits its tonic resolution. The Prelude opens in A minor, but no A minor chord is ever heard.

Wagner holds his harmonies together with intensely chromatic part-writing that generates a wide variety of passing sonorities. When Schoenberg pushed chromatic writing to the point of complete atonality in the early twentieth century, he saw himself as the agent of a historically inevitable development that Wagner had initiated. It is difficult to read Wagner's harmony from the full score, especially as it involves many transposing instruments. Students are recommended to work from a short score alongside NAM. Piano reductions of the Prelude (and of the whole opera) can be downloaded at [http://imslp.org/wiki/Tristan\\_und\\_Isolde,\\_WWV\\_90\\_\(Wagner,\\_Richard\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Tristan_und_Isolde,_WWV_90_(Wagner,_Richard)).

### Harmonic vocabulary

Eighteenth-century practice, particularly since the mid-century, had already increased the tension in the V-I chord progression, by the habitual inclusion of the dominant seventh. Additional tension could be created by one of three dissonant chromatic chords that could herald the dominant. These chords, for all their exotic effect, are closely related to the standard progressions ii-V-I and IV-V-I:

- Chord ii7b, which in a minor key is an inversion of a 'half-diminished' seventh and in a major key can be altered to become a secondary dominant (V7 of V).
- The 'Neapolitan 6th' (also a first inversion of chord ii, but using the flattened supertonic).
- The augmented sixth ('Italian', 'German' or 'French' depending on its exact construction), which can be interpreted as a chromatic version of chord IVb. In sound it mimics the dominant seventh, but the supposed seventh (actually the augmented sixth of the chord) resolves upwards rather than descending.

Where eighteenth-century practice used these chords sparingly, Wagner filled his score with them, exploring a myriad ways of sustaining a sense of expectation.

### The 'Tristan' chord

The famous 'Tristan' chord in bar 2 has surely been analysed more than any other single chord in the history of music. In origin the whole phrase can be understood as an imperfect cadence in A minor via an augmented ('French') sixth decorated with appoggiaturas. The outline is shown in example 1, below. By rearranging the part-writing and letting the final chord 'overrun' its E major resolution to become a dominant seventh, the outline of Wagner's phrase becomes apparent (example 2). Add an appoggiatura to each principal melody note, replace the opening chord with a monophonic melody line that appears to emerge out of the mist, and the complete phrase appears (example 3). The two complex, chromatic and dissonant appoggiatura chords that are sounded are both perfectly allowable within the 'rules' but both stretch the ear beyond the repertoire of basic triads and seventh chords. The 'Tristan' chord, though not always notated in this way, is a particular spacing of a half-diminished seventh in root position (involving a tritone above the bass). The first chord in bar 3, an appoggiatura onto a dominant seventh, consists entirely of whole tones.



### Other harmonic features

Bars 16 to 21 show Wagner exploring a wide variety of chords within a comparatively straightforward tonal context of A minor/C major. (See table on next page.)

### The diminished seventh

A favourite of early romantic composers, the diminished seventh is uncommon in the Prelude but appears from time to time, e.g. in bar 29.

### Harmonic 'illusions'

The first chord in bar 30, spelled C, D# and G#, creates momentarily the deceptive sound of an A flat major triad. The chord is consonant in itself, but dissonant in its context. All its notes are upwardly-resolving appoggiaturas (retardations), moving at different times to the A major chord on beat 2. Two bars later an essential chord is suggested but never sounded. The true resolution of the inverted dominant seventh in bar 31 would be D major in first inversion at the start of bar 32. However, after the chromatic dissonance on the first beat of bar 32, the parts all resolve at different times – the upper part (violin 1) on the second quaver and the middle part (violin 2) on the third quaver. By the time the bass resolves to F# half way through the bar, the middle part has already moved on to D#, taking the harmony beyond the D major chord before it has even been completed.

### Chord progressions in bars 16-22

Bar 16	( <i>In A minor</i> ) Dominant 9th on E (with rising appoggiatura/retardation E sharp, and passing note up to the leading note. )
Bar 17	Chord VI Interrupted cadence. F major chord with appoggiatura B.
Bar 18	Beat 1: ( <i>Moving into C major</i> ) V7b of V (secondary dominant) Beat 2: C major second inversion (passing 6-4)
Bar 19	Beat 1: V7c of V (secondary dominant) Beat 2: V (G major) becoming V7 with passing 7th in the bass.
Bar 20	Beat 1: Ib (C major) followed by passing 6-4 of G minor ( <i>introducing a modulation to D minor</i> ). Beat 2: Diminished seventh – vii7 in D minor
Bar 21	Beat 1: D minor root position with 4-3 appoggiatura. Beat 2: Neapolitan chord in D minor (Eb major first inversion). En route to the expected dominant, Wagner's twist in the part-writing via the E naturals creates a momentary half-diminished chord of ii7 in D minor.
Bar 22	Imperfect cadence in D minor, again with a 4-3 appoggiatura.

## Tonality

Tonality – the key of a piece of music – is confirmed by its cadences, particularly the perfect cadence, when we expect the dominant to be followed by the tonic. Perfect cadences, and the tonal stability that goes with them, are rarely heard in the Prelude. Most of the time, the key is defined by its dominant, without ever touching base (or bass) on a tonic. By using chromatic part-writing, Wagner can slide from dominant to dominant and keep us in a continuous state of suspense. However, some moments have clearer tonal definition than others.

- The opening of the Prelude, so mystifying to the ear, can be seen on paper to skirt around the key of A minor with imperfect cadences in A minor (bar 3), C major (the relative major, bar 7), and E major (the dominant, bar 11), followed by an interrupted cadence in the tonic (bars 16-17).
- The same interrupted cadence provides landmarks in A minor at bars 74 and 94, and in C# minor (cadencing onto an A major chord) at bar 44.
- From bar 61 to 73, during the build-up to the climax of the Prelude, the key is A major, with a low E pedal note from bar 63.
- During the final section, the implied tonic shifts from A to C, with the minor colouring of Eb and Ab.
- Other recognisable cadence points can be found at:
  - Bar 24 Perfect cadence in A major.
  - Bar 35-6 Perfect cadence (Vb-I) in D minor.
  - Bar 62-3 Imperfect cadence in A major.

## Texture

There are two aspects of texture to consider: the underlying construction of the music, and the way it is distributed among the orchestral instruments. The instrumental aspect has been described in the section on Performance forces and their handling (pages 3-4). To the extent that there is always a prevailing melody, and a harmonic progression that moves in step with the melody, the underlying texture is often melody-dominated homophony. However, the term doesn't get us very far in appreciating the character of some parts of the music. The inner parts and bass lines of the Prelude are very rarely given 'accompaniment' figures, but move polyphonically in the same manner as the melody. The end of one melodic phrase often overlaps with the start of another. Wagner's bass moves more slowly than the other lines, but it can seamlessly adopt thematic shapes from the principal melody, as at bars 48-51. At the climax (bars 66-82) several related themes are counterpointed against each other. Identifiable textures include:

- Monophony (bar 1).
- Single line in octaves (bars 14-15, 106-111).
- 4-part writing with undoubled lines (bars 36-40).
- Linear part-writing with lines doubled at 2 or 3 octaves (bars 53-57).
- Doubling in 3rds/10ths (strings, bars 63-69).
- Figural accompaniment (a very typical feature of Romantic orchestration, though rare in the Prelude): broken chords in strings (bars 67-74).

## Rhythm

It could be said that Wagner frequently conceived his music in terms of prose, rather than the regular metres of song and dance. In *Opera and Drama* he wrote, in characteristically rhetorical style: "We have to win from the Prose of our ordinary speech the heightened Expression in which the poetic Aim shall manifest itself." The consequence is a very flexible approach to rhythm, accent and phrase-structure. The opening deliberately obscures any sense of metre by:

- Very slow tempo.
  - Wide variation in note-lengths.
  - Highest notes on a weak point at the end of each phrase.
  - Long rests (of different lengths) between phrases.
  - Additional pauses in bars 11 and 13.
- As a result, we perceive the forward progress of the music as driven entirely by the melodic movement and the placing of chords.
  - The slow compound duple time signature allows a wide variety of internal rhythms between the principal beats.
  - Two typical rhythms appear very frequently - the short-long appoggiatura rhythm in bar 3, with the longer note starting on the second quaver of the bar, and the 3-quaver group with a dotted rhythm on the second and third quavers, first heard in bar 17.
  - A melody note beginning on a weak quaver is often tied across the main beats, at the beginning, middle or end of a phrase. Whether this constitutes 'syncope' is debatable. E.g.
    - Bar 3 – Oboe B held across quavers 2, 3 and 4. (End of phrase).
    - Bar 20 – Cello Bb held across quavers 3 and 4. (Middle of phrase).
    - Bar 30 – Violin A held from quavers 5 and 6 onto the first quaver of the new bar. (Beginning of phrase).
  - Adjacent notes, at all levels in the texture but particularly in the melody, are typically of different lengths. Groups of three quavers are not uncommon, but passages of four or more equal notes are rare.
  - The bass line moves in steady half-bars at points of deliberately increasing tension such as 33-34 and 58-62.
  - Apart from the semiquaver in the characteristic dotted rhythm, notes shorter than a quaver are only used:
    - In the 'bridge passage' in bars 22-24 (semiquavers).
    - For the motif in diminution in 77-80 (semiquavers with dotted figure).
    - For the scales and arpeggios that reinforce the surging figures in 63-73 (mainly triplet demi-semiquavers).