

"WHY DOESN'T ANYONE PLAY BARS 1-11 OF *TRISTAN* IN TEMPO?

IRA BRAUS

Only an ear blessed with the mathematical finesse of a Benoit Mandelbrot would be able to track Wagner's six-to-the-bar in most recorded performances of the *Tristan* Prelude, measures 1-15. Quarters and eighths are interchangeable, rests arbitrary, and bar lengths variable. In these performances, the languishing pulse here foreshadows, with embarrassing literalness, *Tristan's* at the start of the third act.

Some will argue that these distortions are justified by tradition, by nineteenth-century *Aufführungspraxis*. But this view is easily countered by Toscanini's squib that tradition is merely "a collection of bad habits." (A more diversified catalogue of bad habits crammed into so few measures is hard to find!) To justify these distortions by invoking Wagner's *schmach tend* is equally unconvincing, since this order of literalness easily degenerates, *pace* Wagner, into musical theatrics. I believe there is a deeper cause for the problem: a cognitive dissonance perpetuated in the collective aural imagination of the Prelude's performers. By cognitive dissonance I mean the conflict that occurs when performers hear (ergo play) non-integrally in two radically different ways. The cognitive dissonance here arises from a non-integral cognition of harmonic and contrapuntal temporal articulation.

Those familiar with the Prelude's exegetical history will have noted a gradual shift in analytical focus from the late nineteenth century to the present. To condense a lengthy story, exegesis has evolved from a chordal conception of the pitch structure to a horizontal or intervallic one; Jadassohn represents the first extreme, Boretz, the second. I am especially drawn to Milton Babbitt's analysis, for it brings both extremes into confrontation. Moreover, his remarks unintentionally (I'm quite sure) provide insight into why performers have distorted this music for the last hundred years. Babbitt says:

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What makes it the Tristan chord? Do you notice any characteristic about it as a chord worth noticing? Wagner sets it up so that there's a unique interval between any two notes, so that you have a packet of unique intervals which he uses to define spaces in the piece. The Tristan chord is layed out so you have the intervals 6, 10, 3, 4, 9, 5. The layout is crucial to the way this chord is used in the piece, and, of course, it has the same intervals in all its repetitions. You can also view it as a fourth with a tritone a major third away What is this next chord (end of measure 3)? Well, everybody said, "Anybody can tell what it is—that's a good old dominant seventh." Well, what's the good old dominant seventh? The good old dominant seventh is intervallically the same as the first one—it's the Tristan chord! So you see, you don't have to think of this as being a functional dominant seventh chord unless you insist that whenever you hear a dominant seventh (as you do in measure 2 of Schoenberg's *Opus 33a*), it necessarily functions as a dominant seventh.¹

Taking these remarks a step further, I propose that a cognitive dissonance arises when we traverse, in measures 1-3, an apparent continuum between linear- and root-generated verticals. Performers respond to this textural progression with two different types of temporal articulation: the pitches preceding the "good old fashioned dominant seventh" are played fluidly and ametrically; the "good old fashioned dominant seventh-chord" is played as a micro structural downbeat. When these conflicting modes of articulation—horizontal and vertical—are replicated in the ensuing phrases, the net result is the metric disorientation felt by players and listeners alike.

I believe it is possible to retrain musicians to hear and play the opening of the Prelude metrically, so they can convey a real sense of motion by way of the intervallic transformations alone. This presupposes—to use literary jargon—"defamiliarization" of the dominant seventh chord, so its intervallic properties audibly supersede any harmonic-cadential associations. How can we teach this to musicians?

The procedure is quite simple. The musicians must practice the opening of the Prelude with the two chords reversed:

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Figure 1.



This “inversion” of the passage will no doubt shock the performers, but this is in fact the point of the exercise. The dominant seventh (and its A-sharp “appoggiatura”) will pass, just as the Tristan chord (and its intervening A) does. Thus, after the players hear that the “good old-fashioned dominant-seventh” is itself linearly derived, they will expect (and demand) that the music *continue* rather than hover ametrically after each “unresolved dominant.” This suggests, incidentally, a further experiment in music cognition. How would an orchestra perform the Prelude if it (and the conductor) were given barless parts?² At the very least, the task of deciphering the meter and preserving the ensemble would necessitate fastidious counting!

One can neither argue nor impose taste, so I shall not decree that performances of the Prelude henceforth be executed metrically. I do hope, nonetheless, that some future conductor will at least entertain the possibility that Wagner’s unique tonal language in *Tristan* is better projected by measured performance, and that the Prelude “languishes” quite convincingly *in tempo*.

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NOTES

¹Stephen Dembski and Joseph N. Straus, eds. *Words about Music*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987.

²Ideally, the performers would be unfamiliar with the Prelude. This situation is improbable (except if we are speaking of quite inexperienced players); still, it would be enlightening to observe the degree to which seasoned players would change their perception and performance of the music.