

Mayrberger's Analysis of *Tristan*

Perhaps no work has ever excited¹ the reaction from music theorists that Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* has. The debate began some fourteen years after the opera's premiere (Munich: 1865) with Cyrill Kistler's analysis of the "Tristan Chord." By the time Mayrberger wrote his study two years later, it was already clear that *Tristan* had become the touchstone for any system of harmony aspiring to legitimacy. At the turn of the century the Riemann partisans attempted to apply his system to *Tristan*,²⁴ and even Capellen's *Streitschrift* (the content of which is really a general attack on Sechter's whole system) claimed to be an inquiry into the "suitability" of Sechter's system for "Wagner research."²⁵ Twenty years later the enigmatic language of *Tristan* would become the model for Ernst Kurth's researches in chromatic harmony,²⁶ and recent writings show that *Tristan* continues to be as provocative as ever.²⁷

Kistler, a born-again Wagnerite,²⁸ is the author of the first practical harmony book which assumes the Wagnerian style as a norm.²⁹ Essentially, the book consists of practical advice (including many progressions which capture the style rather well, and—in the second edition—quite a number of examples from the literature) supported by Hauptmannian theory. Kistler's explanation of the "Tristan Chord" is based upon a personal interpretation (or perhaps a misunderstanding) of Hauptmann's "overlapping system" (*übergreifendes System*), a theory by which Hauptmann sought to account for tonicizations of the dominant or subdominant.

The normal minor key (for example, C minor: F a_b C e_b G b D) can be shifted by one third to the right, resulting in the *übergreifendes Mollsystem* (a_b C e_b G b D f_#).³⁰ Using this scheme one may construct the new seventh chords: D f_#/a_b C or f_#/a_b C e_b from the extremes of the chain of thirds. Hauptmann denies the possibility of b D f_#/a_b, claiming that the chord is "untrue" and "discordant" because it contains two leading tones (b and f_#) which must create parallel fifths upon resolution.³¹ The possibility that one of the leading tones might be retained in the chord of resolution (precisely what happens if one chooses this interpretation of the "Tristan Chord") does not seem to have occurred to Hauptmann. This is the interpretation which Kistler chooses, making him the inventor of the idea that the "Tristan Chord" is the "minor triad with diminished seventh" on scale degree VII.³²

This was the entire extent of theory connected with *Tristan* when Mayrberger entered the fracas. A true Sechter disciple, Mayrberger attempted to apply Sechter's norms of harmonic progression to *Tristan*. The diminished third/augmented sixth chords have only one place in Sechter's system: they must be derived from II7 or II9. Accordingly, Mayrberger considers the "Tristan Chord" to be Sechter's "hybrid-chord," and thus becomes the author of the other interpretation of the "Tristan Chord"—the one

in which the G# is nonchordal,³³ and the one which Lorenz later calls "the most significant step" in the analysis of the "Tristan Chord."³⁴

Example 10-5

The musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is a treble clef with a 6/8 time signature. The lower staff is a bass clef with a 6/8 time signature. The music features a complex sequence of chords and melodic lines, including a prominent Tristan Chord (B-D-E-G#) and subsequent chords like E7 and G.

	A.	D.	B.	E.		B. E.	A. D.	G.
a min.	1.	4.	2.	5.		2. 5.	1. 4.	
e min/maj			5.	1.		d min. 5.c min		2. 5.
						g min./maj.	5.	1.

Regardless of the reaction one might have to Hauptmann's *übergreifendes System* as an explanation of the "Tristan Chord," there does seem to be a grain of truth in Kistler's idea. If we were to view the work from the perspective of a present-day analyst, we might call upon the voice exchange B-G#/G#-B as evidence that the G# is *not* nonchordal.³⁵ However, a chordal G# presumes a view of "harmony" which is considerably broader than that of any nineteenth-century theory. That is, if we dismiss Kistler's solution as mere labeling, and yet believe that the G# is chordal in both the "Tristan Chord" and the subsequent E7 chord, then we are forced to conclude that there is no harmonic progression between these two chords. (In fact, even if Kistler's label is retained, the motion of VII to V is essentially no progression—according to both the step and function theory.) This is obviously something which early analysts—accustomed as they were to accounting for most chord-to-chord motion in harmonic terms—were unprepared to accept. Consequently, Mayrberger's analysis of the "Tristan Chord" was one of the most influential aspects of his work. This is one point where the German and Viennese theories agreed, and thus the vast majority of later commentators also see the "Tristan Chord" as some sort of "B7" chord; the only question remaining is whether it is an alteration of a diatonic II7—a subdominant "function" (Lorenz)—or of V7/V (Kurtz).³⁶

Just as the hybrid-chord is a response to Sechter's system, so too is Mayrberger's analysis of the first complete measure. When Mitchell says that this bar represents I, but that the opening cello solo has been misinterpreted in the past as outlining VI or IV,³⁷ the responsibility again may well be Mayrberger's. If the "Tristan Chord" is "II," the previous measure cannot possibly be "I"; it *must* be VI or IV.

So far, Mayrberger has encountered few problems. The real trouble begins, however, with the next transposition of the "Tristan Chord."

Mayrberger gives the following analysis of these measures (ex. 10-6a):

Example 10-6

	A.	(F#)	B.		A.	(F#)	B.
a min.	1.						
e min.	4.	(2.)	5.				

The second two rather complicated measures, we are told, may be reduced to the simpler structure of example 10-6b. Here, we must quote Mayrberger's explanation exactly:

D is the free [unprepared] suspension of the eleventh, which, in order to ascend, becomes a chromatic passing tone, D#.

G# is the suspension of the rising seventh, which becomes a ninth over the imaginary fundamental F# and later resolves to the seventh of the dominant over B.

F is the suspension of the thirteenth, which resolves according to the rules. E# in the upper voice is the melodic-chromatic lower neighbor of F#. ³⁸

If we can trust what Mayrberger has had to say on these matters in his *Lehrbuch*, the "free suspension of the eleventh" (D), the "suspension of the ascending seventh"³⁹ (G#), and the "suspension of the thirteenth" (F) are "nonessential" dissonances; that is, the first chord is a *melodic* suspension chord.⁴⁰ Vogel, however, claims that "he [Mayrberger] calls the verticality C-F-G#-D a hybrid-chord from A minor:I and E minor:IV."⁴¹ But Mayrberger never calls *this* verticality a "hybrid-chord"; in fact, he never says that these dissonances form a chord at all. Once again, the misunderstanding is probably due to Riemann's familiar third-stacking accusation.

In his attempt to account for these difficult measures, Mayrberger reaches for a familiar progression from Sechter: the phrygian half cadence with Sechter's obligatory "intermediate fundamental." If his analysis seems less than convincing, it is interesting that one of the first attempts to apply Riemann's theory of harmony to *Tristan* agrees exactly with Mayrberger at this point,⁴² and that later attempts to account for these measures have not been trouble-free either. Kurth's analysis, for example, seems even less convincing than Mayrberger's.⁴³ Even if local harmonic problems are deemphasized by

concentrating on long-range features, difficulties remain: the clear voice exchange which is essential to Mitchell's reading of the "Tristan Chord" becomes a somewhat more obscure chromatic exchange here (F-D/D \sharp -F \sharp).⁴⁴ It is precisely at this point that the symmetrical minor third transposition scheme of the first two phrases (excepting the opening A) gives way to the demands of the tonal system: the B7 chord, creating the middleground appregiation of the dominant. Some tension between these two contradictory phenomena is bound to assert itself in the analysis.

Although Mayrberger's study is supposedly confined to the *Leitmotive* from *Tristan*, he nevertheless manages to cover a considerable amount of the Prelude,⁴⁵ and in the second installment he deals with passages from Act I as well. The chromatic passing and suspension chords, while perhaps not as prominent as one might expect, continue to play an important role in his analyses. Two notable examples are the passing six-four in the second half of measure 18 of the Prelude (the "Glance" motive; see ex. 10-7a),⁴⁶ and the analysis of the first statement of the "Deliverance by Death" motive (mm. 63-70 of the Prelude),⁴⁷ in which all chords other than E7 are read as "nonessential."

Example 10-7

The image shows a musical score for two examples, 'a' and 'b'. Example 'a' is labeled '(m. 18)' and shows a treble clef staff with a passing six-four chord and a bass clef staff with a D major chord. Example 'b' is labeled '(m. 65)' and shows a treble clef staff with a chromatic passage and a bass clef staff with an E7 chord. The bass clef staff for 'a' has three notes: D, D, D. The bass clef staff for 'b' has three notes: E, E, E.

In the second section of the monograph Mayrberger also has more to say regarding his "new" theory of the *harmonic ellipsis*, the basis of which is his belief that dissonances need not be resolved if they merely have the possibility of resolution.⁴⁸ This notion serves conveniently to explain away a multitude of harmonic freedoms, such as unresolved sevenths. And if resolutions can be elided, Mayrberger reasons, why not whole chords as well? This is precisely the way in which he accounts for troublesome chromatic root progressions: the motion of C major to D \flat major, for example, is explained by interpolating an imaginary C \circ 7 between the two chords,⁴⁹ proving once again the versatility—if not the usefulness—of this time-worn idea.

One of the most loyal of Sechter's followers, Mayrberger accepted Sechter's system almost unquestioningly, and thus its deficiencies are inherent

in his analyses. Sechter's rigid rules of progression and the rapid harmonic rhythm resulting from their application already seem incompatible with the musical language of *Tristan* in the first eight bars (ex. 10-5). And the charge of "too many modulations" would later become a familiar criticism. Mayrberger deserves to be defended here, however. Although he accepted Sechter's limited definition of a key, he was able to see beyond the succession of swiftly changing keys and make broader connections—at least on some occasions. Example 10-8 shows a passage derived from the "Glance" motive as it appears in the second scene of Act I.⁵⁰ Although Mayrberger is forced to call upon three different keys to explain a four-measure passage, his analysis also makes it quite clear that the excursions into G and D minor act as a means of prolonging the dominant of C:

Example 10-8

in C maj. G. G. (E.) A. F#(D) G. C.
 in d min. S. ————— 5. 1.
 in 4. (2.) 5. 2. 7. (5) 1.

It should also be noted that many of Mayrberger's "modulations" result from the lack of any notation for tonicization in Sechter's system. But although the system failed to distinguish between "modulations" of extreme brevity and those of longer duration, it seems likely that Mayrberger himself was aware of this distinction; that is, the "modulations" in example 10-8, for instance, could hardly have been as significant to Mayrberger as the present-day definition of the term might suggest. The most important failing of the system in regard to modulation is undeniable, however: it provided no real means by which to account for modulations which transcended the diatonic *Verwandtschaft*.⁵¹

The question which naturally arises is what, if anything, did Mayrberger accomplish with his efforts? His subordination of the "Tristan Chord" to a model of harmonic syntax (albeit, a somewhat primitive one) was certainly an important and influential contribution. Furthermore, he was probably the first to distinguish clearly between three types of chromaticism: the true chromatic chord (Sechter's "hybrid-chord"), the chromatic chord resulting from melodic processes, and chromaticism of a purely melodic (embellishing) sort.⁵² This would later be taken over by Louis and Thuille.

Mayrberger's effort to retain the eighteenth-century theory of harmony as a kind of *reiner Satz* against which to gauge the apparent freedoms of *Tristan* differed considerably from German attempts to grapple with the piece. At the very end of the century a slim volume entitled *Melodik und Harmonik bei R. Wagner* by Salmon Jadassohn appeared.⁵³ Jadassohn, the author of one of the favorite harmony texts of the later nineteenth century,⁵⁴ was a student of Hauptmann's, and (like his teacher) a thoroughgoing verticalist. According to Jadassohn, the harmonic language of *Tristan* is characterized by Wagner's use of "passing altered tones" which have a "chordal meaning."⁵⁵ Example 10-9 shows his analysis of the opening of *Tristan*:

Example 10-9

Langsam.

The image displays a musical score for the opening of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, marked "Langsam." (Ad libitum). It consists of two systems of music, each with a piano (p) and bass (b) staff. The first system begins with a piano dynamic marking (*pp*) and a crescendo hairpin. The piano staff contains a melodic line with various chromatic alterations, while the bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment. Below the piano staff, vertical lines connect specific notes to chordal analysis symbols: $f15: VII^0_7$, $a: II^0_7$, and $H: VII^0_7$. The second system continues the piece, also featuring a crescendo. Similar chordal analysis symbols are provided below the piano staff: $f15: VII^0_7$, $c: II^0_7$, $h: II^0_7$, and $c^{\#}: V^{\#}_7$. At the bottom of the second system, further analysis symbols are listed: $c: II^0_7$, IV_7 , $f: I_7$, $es: II^0_7$, and $e: V_7$. The score includes various musical notations such as accidentals, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Jadassohn contends that chordal meaning—no matter how farfetched—is always chosen by the ear above melodic meaning; and the analysis which results shows the most extreme concentration upon chordal identity at the expense of harmonic syntax. Jadassohn's implicit definition of melodic

dissonance is so narrow as to leave no room for interpretation, or for the existence of "apparently consonant" structures which function as dissonances:

one cannot speak here of suspensions which enter freely and resolve upward, or of passing tones; for the characteristic of suspensions as of passing tones is not that they form components of a chord, but that they dissonate against it.⁵⁶

Jadassohn may be an extreme case—his ideas certainly seem to have had little further influence—but his assumption that contrapuntal explanations of Wagnerian harmony are arbitrary and unsatisfactory has continued to survive.⁵⁷ In studying the continuing battle between harmonic and contrapuntal explanations of *Tristan* one cannot help but be reminded of the words of a far more influential spokesman for the conservative faction:

Then Wagner came along! His formations of passing tones, appoggiaturas, neighboring notes, suspensions were so biting to the ear that because of their highly pungent effect, musicians were unable to classify them despite the fact that they were quite simple. . . . Some believed that a new theory was necessary to explain such chords. . . .⁵⁸