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Edexcel A Level Syllabus – Analysis

Richard Wagner: Prelude to Tristan and Isolde

Jack Day

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Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Prelude to Tristan and Isolde (1857-59)

Wagner was born in the place J.S.Bach worked out his final years, Leipzig, and studied music, art, and aesthetics at the town's University. His first compositions were published when he was 18, and at 20 he was appointed Chorus Master of Wuerzburg opera house. He took a large part in the unsuccessful German revolution of 1849, and lived in exile until 1860, mostly in Zürich. It was here that he began work on *Tristan and Isolde* in April 1857, finishing the work in Lucerne in July 1859.

Wagner is an important figure in opera, as a theorist and 'composer as dramatist', as Joseph Kerman described him in *Opera as Drama*. His works were performed during the Third Reich, amplifying his notoriety as an anti-semitic composer.

The *Tristan Prelude* is a pivotal romantic work and pushes the boundaries of tonality to their limit, to such an extent that the Swiss musicologist Ernst Kurth described it as a crisis for tonal harmony. *Tristan* follows in the footsteps of late Beethoven piano sonatas, Liszt's *Sonata in B minor*, and pre-emptes the greater dissonance of Strauss's *Elektra* and Schoenberg's *Verklaerte Nacht*. Wagner assimilated Hector Berlioz' subtle and inventive use of the orchestra, which he expanded still further, and his harmonic and structural practice is more advanced. As Robin Holloway proved, Wagner's harmonic ingenuity had a particularly strong influence on Debussy, although Debussy sometimes proceeds by discontinuity, rather than the sumptuous continuous sections from which the *Tristan Prelude* is formed.

The particularly yearning, sighing quality of the music is well fitted to the opera's subject matter, a tense love triangle between Tristan, Isolde and King Mark. Isolde is married to King Mark (of Cornwall) but Tristan and Isolde both drank a love potion, ensuring their unending but impossible love for one another. The story dates from the twelfth century. Wagner conceived all his operas on a large scale, so it is no surprise to find that the prelude alone lasts over ten minutes.

The cello's yawning opening falls, to form part of the **Tristan Chord**. This chord (f, b, d sharp, g sharp) is a dissonance, and must therefore resolve. When 'normal' chords

resolve, part of the chord stays the same, and part of it moves: compare bars 9-13 of the Haydn on page 31. *All* the parts move *from* the Tristan chord in an unorthodox chromatic elision. There is therefore a process associated with this chord, in which the harmonic function of each part is uncertain: there is constant harmonic ambiguity.

The prelude ends in G, after spelling out the Tristan chord in the cellos and basses. G is the dominant of C, so it is interesting to think about how the *Tristan chord* could resolve to C: if one takes the top G sharp to be an added note, then the remaining notes could easily move: f to e, b to c, and d sharp to e. The whole opera ends in B major, which is a slightly easier resolution: f to e, b stays where it is, d sharp to e, and g sharp to f sharp.

It is therefore impossible to write about tonal architecture in the way one might consider the Bach or Haydn examples from this section. However the way Wagner marshals his musical material is there to observe:

Bar	What happens	Comments
4-7	Repeat of bars 1-3, transposed up a minor third, with different orchestration	
8-11	Third statement Earlier opening cello solo (by half a bar) Tristan chord is 'spelt' upside down, with the diminished fifth on top and the perfect fourth down below; there is still a minor third in the middle.	
12-13	As bars 10-11, transposed up an octave, with high woodwind scoring.	
14-15	Replay the E-sharp, F-sharp appoggiatura	
16-17	Grow out of the E/F-sharp to an interrupted (V-VI) cadence: see below.	

The normal place for a dominant seventh on E to resolve to is A major. This does not happen in bars 16-17. Instead the bass moves upwards to F, and not as final as the

perfect cadence one might expect in less interesting music. This extraordinary closure occurs again at fairly regular intervals, at bars 44, 74 and 94.

All of this gives the impression of a great but elusive object, of which the listener catches sideways glances but can never fully comprehend, because the myriad functional possibilities offered by the harmonic procedure mean that you never know which way the music will turn next. The constant crescendo or decrescendo and the music's habit of retreating to the upper woodwind also contribute to this effect: bars 1-17 are remarkable for the way that everything grows organically from what precedes it.

18-36	Continuous texture: cello solo tune with chromatically ascending bass part	
36-43	Quiet and broken up: Tristan chord and resolution, upper woodwind	Woodwind echo strings
44	Imperfect cadence	
45-62	Continuous texture: cello tune back, but passed around other instruments. Crescendos to a greater volume and more of a feeling of pushing forward.	
63-74	Strings: complex parts with upward-sweeping scales to triadic descent. Woodwind: chromatic scales upwards (from resolution of Tristan chord, bar 3) Bass: initially a pedal point on E, but later moves around adding to dramatic tension.	
74	Imperfect cadence	
74-85	Extension of material from 63-74, with brief outing for 'cello tune (bars 74-80)	
84-100	Quiet and broken up Material from all sections, fragmented	
100-106	Concise and uncluttered statement of the Tristan chord	

106-111	Tristan chord spelt out in cellos	
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