

WAGNER: TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

Prelude to Act I | Harmonic Analysis | Measures 1–24

"The opening bars that changed Western harmony"

THE THREE TRISTAN STATEMENTS

Each: half-dim 7th → dom 7th, no tonic resolution

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| M. 1 | Unaccompanied cello: A–F–E. Grief motif. Monophonic. Implies A minor. |
| M. 2 | THE TRISTAN CHORD: F♭7 (F–B–D#–G#). Half-dim 7th. Functions as ii♭7 in Am. [1][2] |
| M. 3 | Resolves to E7 (V7 in Am). Imperfect cadence. Desire motif completes (B–C–D#–E). [1][3] |
| M. 4 | Silence. Phrase break. [1] |
| M. 5 | Cello re-enters. Grief motif restated, beginning 8va below prior phrase ending. [1] |
| M. 6 | 2nd Tristan statement (transposed up): A♭♭7. Half-dim on b6, C minor context. [2] |
| M. 7 | Resolves to G7 (V7 in Cm). Imperfect cadence. No tonic resolution. Silence follows. [2] |
| M. 8 | Silence. Phrase break. Phrases begin shortening from here through m. 15. [1] |
| M. 9 | Melodic pickup. Same pattern — 8va below last note of prior phrase, leaps a 6th. [1] |
| M. 10 | 3rd Tristan statement (transposed up again): B♭7. Half-dim on b7, Em context. [2] |
| M. 11 | Resolves to A7. Most tonally ambiguous of the three. Additional fermata/pause. [1][2] |
| M. 12–13 | Fragmentation. Desire motif reduced to last two notes. Additional pause at m. 13. [1] |
| M. 14–15 | Bare octaves. Chromatic fragments, unaccompanied. Tension through starvation. [1] |

FIRST CADENTIAL MOTION

16 bars in — the first real cadence, and it's deceptive

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| M. 16 | V9 in Am (dom 9th on E). Rising appoggiatura E#. First full orchestral chord. Forte. [1] |
| M. 17 | VI (F major) — INTERRUPTED CADENCE. Glance motif enters in cellos. Deceptive. [1] |

TONAL DEVELOPMENT: Am → C MAJOR → D MINOR → A MAJOR

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| M. 18 | Bt 1: V7/V (secondary dom, moving into C major). Bt 2: C major 2nd inv (passing 6-4). [1] |
| M. 19 | Bt 1: V7c/V (secondary dom). Bt 2: V (G major) becoming V7, passing 7th in bass. [1] |
| M. 20 | Bt 1: Ib (C maj 1st inv) then passing 6-4 of Gm → modulation to Dm. Bt 2: vii°7 in Dm. [1] |
| M. 21 | Bt 1: Dm root pos, 4-3 appo. Bt 2: Neapolitan 6th (Eb maj 1st inv) in Dm. [1] |
| M. 22 | Imperfect cadence in D minor with 4-3 appoggiatura. [1] |
| M. 23–24 | Bridge passage (semiquavers). Bar 24: PERFECT CADENCE IN A MAJOR — one of the only V–I cadences in the entire 111-bar prelude. Love Potion motif enters at m. 25. [1][4] |

THE ENGINE: ii♭7 → V7, sequenced three times (Am, Cm, Em), never resolving to tonic. [1][2][3]

The prelude opens in A minor but no A minor chord is ever sounded. Everything is defined by dominants that never touch home. The cadences introduced here are not resolved until the finale of Act 3. [1][3]

KEY: ♭7 = half-dim 7th | V7 = dom 7th | V9 = dom 9th | V7/V = secondary dom | VI = submediant | vii°7 = dim 7th | Bt = Beat
N6 = Neapolitan 6th | Ib = tonic 1st inv | 6-4 = 2nd inv | 4-3 = suspension | 8va = octave | appo = appoggiatura

SOURCES

- [1] Pearson Edexcel A-Level Music, Unit 6.4: "Wagner: Prelude to Tristan und Isolde" (2013). Bar-by-bar harmonic vocabulary and chord progressions, mm. 16–24; structural and tonal analysis of the complete prelude.
- [2] ComposerNotes.com: "Richard Wagner – The Tristan Chord." Catalogued half-diminished chord occurrences and resolution patterns across the prelude, including analysis of the chord on the 6th, b7th, and other scale degrees.
- [3] Nattiez, Jean-Jacques. Music and Discourse (Princeton UP, 1990). Synthesis of competing analyses; establishes A minor context and privileges the ii-degree reading, citing Mayrberger's Wagner-approved interpretation.
- [4] Steinberg, Russell. "The Tristan Progression In More Depth." russellsteinberg.com (Dec 2022). Structural analysis.

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