

**On the Chord of Tristan**

By and large, great works of art are the result of modest intentions. Thomas Mann wrote that “ambition should not come before the work of art, in principle, but grow together with it (...). Nothing can be more misled than ambition with no object, ambition as such (...), the livid ambition of the self”. Richard Wagner composed *Tristan und Isolde* to take a rest from the extenuating energy he was putting into his tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung*, which was his true ambition, and which, he was fully aware, was going to mark the future of musical drama henceforth. He had initially envisaged *Tristan und Isolde* as “a lighter work, easier to bring onto the stage due to its less daunting dimensions and demands on stagecraft”, indeed, not as problematical to program and execute than the monumental Tetralogy. It had never crossed Wagner’s mind that he was going to revolutionize anything when he composed this work. As Furtwängler wrote, “it was merely that he was interested in finding the most adequate expression”. In this way he was going to “discover” the chromatic system and its promising future, a fact which, to him, was of secondary importance: “a mere accident”. The case is that, whether as an accident or as the daring use of chromatism, the resulting modulation and harmonic instability provided the utmost poignancy to express the impossible love between the two characters, only to be realized beyond their life in this world. Thus, Wagner anticipated and opened the doors towards the break-up of the tonal system at the end of the nineteenth century.

Rivers of ink have flowed because of the “Tristan chord”, conceived as the thematic cell marking the end of traditional harmony. The chord refuses to clarify its tonality, remaining unstable and ambiguous, hostile to the postulates on which classical harmonic theory based the analysis of any score. That chord, and in general, the split cadenzas in the rest of the prelude, give the spectator an uneasy feeling of perpetual recurrence, of not being able to find a way out of the nebulous, addictive, maybe erotic obsession. The sensation is of transcendence, of an absence of resting points that might provide a place to stop, of the impossibility of granting oneself a moment’s respite. Wagner achieved something surprising with a simplicity that was even more surprising: he suspended the functions of the tonal system that had been in place since the seventeenth century. This chord, that remains unresolved throughout the almost five hours of the performance, will only allow us to rest when, in the final notes of the work, we understand that the intensity of the love between Tristan and Isolde, a love that breaks every norm and which cannot be contained by the loyalty of the subject, or by adultery or by divine punishment, will only be contained on the other side of death.

In a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, Wagner wrote “When I had the prelude of *Tristan und Isolde* played for the first time, as if a blindfold had fallen from my eyes, I realized what an unbridgeable distance from the world I had reached in the last eight years. This prelude was so incomprehensibly novel for my musicians that I had to guide them from note to note, as though we were discovering precious stones among the treasure. Angel-Fernando Mayo asked himself what actually happened during that rehearsal: it was simply that the French musicians, born and bred in the diatonic language of the time, lightly acquainted with the dissonances that Meyerbeer scattered strategically in his operas like “effects without a cause” (Wagner dixit), were unable to comprehend, out of the blue, the nature and target which the new, decidedly chromatic Wagnerian writing was aiming for. How could anyone accept, against every rule of consonance, that the first three notes of the cellos (A-F-E) should be followed by such an unprecedented chord between the cellos and two oboes (F-B-D-G) to provide a support for the resolution of the phrase that was likewise ascendant and vague? After the concert in Paris, the prelude of *Tristan und Isolde* was qualified by Berlioz as an “enigma”, a particularly fortunate term to express the disquieting aspect of the work due to its inner tension, due to the effect of turbulent agitation, which in fact contrasts with the static nature of the action onstage. What determines the dramatic situation after the opera’s prelude are events that have already occurred previously or will unfold as a mere formality: all of the genuine dramatic action is interior and the real spectacle does not reside in the spectacularity of the plot but in the intensity of the intimate emotions it is accompanied by.

Appropriation of this chord on behalf of another work of art, so as to explore its expressive potential over and beyond Wagnerian musical drama is perfectly legitimate. Hegel used to say, very much in tune with the romantic taste of his generation, that music is quintessentially the art of subjectivity. Music is without concepts. That is the basis of its power and of its defenselessness. According to Carl Dahlhaus and Hans Heinrich, “Its power is such that it can be extended to all of human existence, to all of its activities and all its states of mind. Yet its defenselessness is such that it can be put to use, made functional, and its use can be changed for any other purpose”. Vacca considers the “Tristan Chord” to be a “cultural gene; once listened to, it can never be forgotten”. It is beyond Wagner himself. The artist invites us to attend a repetition of the chord “in the manner of an acoustic loop which dares to suspend real time”.

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Diatónica: Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Si / Cromática: Do Do# Re Re#  
Mi Fa Fa# Sol Sol# La  
La# Si

VACCA