

# 'You Ancient, Solemn Tune': Narrative Levels of Wagner's *Hirtenreigen*

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## ABSTRACT

At the onset of the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner follows forty-three measures of the prelude with a forty-two-measure unaccompanied English horn solo. Known variously as the "shepherd's tune," the *alte Weise* or, following Wagner, the *Hirtenreigen*, this enigmatic interlude has been the subject of some contention among Wagner's contemporary critics because of its unusual instrumentation and considerable duration. It is suggested that Wagner designed the *Hirtenreigen* as a means to accomplish his immediate dramatic priority at this point in the narrative: elucidating Tristan's memories of his complicity in his parents' deaths and, consequently, his realization and eventual acceptance of a similar fate for himself and his beloved. This is attained not only through the design of the initial exposition of the *Hirtenreigen*, but through its subsequent treatment when it is recapitulated during Tristan's "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue in Act III, scene 1. First, it is argued that the modal characteristic and Bar-form structure of the unaccompanied melody specifically evoke an "ancient" topos, which Wagner exploits to raise the issue of Tristan's past. Second, by dressing the melodic material of the *Hirtenreigen* in various instrumental and harmonic guises throughout the "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue, Wagner is able to present the tune in three narrative levels: the diegetic level (sound occurring within the narrative world), the metadiegetic level (sound occurring in Tristan's memory as he recounts his past), and the extradiegetic level (sound, like the leitmotif, that does not occur within the opera's narrative world). These concepts of narrativity are borrowed from the structural narratology of Gérard Genette and the film music studies of Claudia Gorbman. The conclusion of the paper is that Wagner's ability to enhance the transition between narrative levels of the dramatic text through his musical setting is a hallmark of his style.

At the onset of the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*, our hero lays wounded and unconscious in his native Kareol. Wagner's stage direction for the loyal Kurvenal to kneel over his comatose master, monitoring his every breath, provides a palpable moment of heightened expectancy regarding Tristan's fate.<sup>1</sup> In his psychoanalytic reading of the opera, Slavoj Žižek aptly summarizes Tristan's state: "In Act III, Tristan is already a living dead man, dwelling between the two deaths, no longer at home in reality, pulled back into daily life from the blissful domain of the night and longing to return there."<sup>2</sup> Tristan is suspended – not only between life and death, but reality and fantasy, day and night. As such, in direct contrast to the heightened action at the end of Act II, there is a pause in the momentum of the narrative.

The pregnant stillness of this opening is reflected in Wagner's musical introduction to Act III. It consists of two symmetrical parts: the orchestral prelude, totaling 43 measures prior to the rise of the curtain, and an extended English horn solo referred to by Wagner as the *Hirtenreigen*,<sup>3</sup> totaling 42 measures, to be played "auf dem Theater" ["from the stage"].<sup>4</sup> The presence of a substantial prelude to the ultimate act is certainly not surprising considering the breadth and depth of the preludes to Act I (112 measures) and Act II (75 measures). Nor is the function of the prelude unclear: its purpose is to acquaint the audience with the narrative in its present state. As Thomas Grey suggests, "the magnificently attenuated gestures of the orchestral prelude convey the impression of a vast and desolate horizon, the steel-grey surface

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973), 466.

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Deeper Than the Day Could Read," in *Opera's Second Death*, by Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Commentators have referred to this interlude by many names, including the *alte Weise*, the "shepherd's tune," and the "shepherd's lament."

<sup>4</sup> Wagner, *Tristan*, 466.

of the sea that symbolizes the bleak empty day in contrast to the lush depths of night in the previous act.”<sup>5</sup> However, while the function of the prelude seems clear, this cannot be said about the *Hirtenreigen*. The enigmatic interlude (see Example 1) has been the subject of some contention among Wagner's contemporary critics.

### Example 1. The *Hirtenreigen*, Act III, Scene 1.<sup>6</sup>



In 1876, Heinrich Dorn, likely referring to the implied chromatic harmony and surprising modal inflections, called it “a mad Fantasy upon the schalmei” which was fit for an English horn player in an insane asylum.<sup>7</sup> Wagner's renowned adversary, Eduard Hanslick, took issue with the duration of the interlude, stating in 1883:

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Grey, “In the Realm of the Senses,” in *Richard Wagner Tristan und Isolde*, ed. Arthur Groos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 79.

<sup>6</sup> Wagner, *Tristan*, 466.

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Tappert, *Ein Wagner-Lexicon: Wörterbuch der Unhöflichkeit* (Leipzig: E.W. Fritzsche, 1877), 42.

Over this third act, so originally and suggestively introduced by the mournful song of the shepherd, there hangs an uncommonly compelling, monotonous sadness. But hardly anyone can bear with its awful length. Here, as in the second-act duet, one asks oneself how a composer of Wagner's eminent understanding of the theatre can ignore all sense of proportion.<sup>8</sup>

While recent commentators, in contrast to Wagner's contemporaries, tend to keep their remarks on the *Hirtenreigen* well on the side of veneration, its length and unique orchestration seem to have remained remarkable. James Treadwell finds that "the long melancholy *alte Weise* on the cor anglais instills a dumb grief into the opera that is only overcome with Isolde's very last speech."<sup>9</sup> Why did Wagner risk dramatic stagnation with such an extended and pared-down interlude in an already static moment of the narrative?

Contrary to the criticism of some of Wagner's contemporaries, it will be shown that the *Hirtenreigen* and its subsequent reoccurrences in the first scene of Act III represent an essential musical device for the achievement of one Wagner's primary dramatic aims: Tristan's self-discovery of his role in his parents' deaths and, thus, the character's awareness and eventual acceptance of his fate. First, it is argued that there are two crucial characteristics of the design of the tune itself: its prominent modal inflections and its traditional Bar form. The combination of these characteristics evokes a *topos* of the "ancient" which is necessary to probe Tristan's past. Second, it is demonstrated that Wagner exploits the monophonic *Hirtenreigen* as a "blank slate" which he dresses in various instrumental and harmonic guises to explore Tristan's consciousness throughout his "Muss ich

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<sup>8</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *Music Criticisms 1846-99*, trans. and ed. Henry Pleasants (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Book Ltd, 1950), 226.

<sup>9</sup> James Treadwell, *Interpreting Wagner* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 185.

dich so verstehen" monologue. Drawing on Gérard Genette's theories of narrative level from structural narratology and film music studies by Claudia Gorbman, it is shown that Wagner achieves this exploration by presenting the *Hirtenreigen* in three narrative levels: the diegetic level (the piping of the *Hirtenreigen* by the Shepherd character which occurs within the action of the opera), the metadiegetic level (Tristan's memory of hearing the *Hirtenreigen*) and the extradiegetic level (aspects of the *Hirtenreigen* that are stated in the well-known leitmotif technique).

### **"Ancient" Design in the *Hirtenreigen***

In order to be ushered into the world of Tristan's past, Wagner needed a musical vehicle that would transport Tristan (and the listener) to the time of his birth – a passage that, by musical design, evoked the "folk" association of the Shepherd and thus seemed to come from an old source. As Jean-Jacques Nattiez has noted, Wagner recounts in his autobiography that a folk song was a possible genetic source for the *Hirtenreigen*.<sup>10</sup> Wagner states that he was profoundly affected by the "deep wail" of the gondola drivers in Venice and that these songs, "not unlike the cry of an animal... possibly even suggested to me the longdrawn wail of the shepherd's horn at the beginning of the third act."<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the truth of the anecdote, it is undeniable that, at least later in his life, Wagner considered the content of the *Hirtenreigen* to be "suggested" from an oral folk tradition (Venetian gondola drivers). Indeed, the very fact that the *Hirtenreigen* is performed by the character of the Shepherd gives this music a folk designation. This is reinforced

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez, trans. Stewart Spencer, *Wagner Androgyne* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 150-151.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Wagner, *My Life* (London: Constable, 1911), 697.

by the pastoral association of the English horn – an association not lost on Wagner considering his similar instrumentation for the Shepherd character in *Tannhäuser*.<sup>12</sup>

As the eighteenth-century conception of a “folk music” that was distinct from “art music” gained prominence in Wagner’s nineteenth-century Europe, composers sought ways to synthesize the two through so-called acts of “genius.” Béla Bartók would later identify three compositional strategies in which the two categories could be merged: composers could write music with general folk “consciousness,” incorporate actual folk themes into art music works, or use “invented” folk themes.<sup>13</sup> That Wagner’s own thoughts on the synthesis of folk and art music are congruent with Bartók’s first and last strategy is clear from his own writing on Beethoven. In his well-known essay on his predecessor, Wagner praised Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” from the Ninth Symphony for being evidence that the composer did not exploit invented folk melodies “to afford entertainment at princely banquet-tables, but... in an ideal sense *before the people themselves*.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, for Wagner, Beethoven did not succumb to the temptation to synthesize “folk music” and “art music” elements by elevating the socio-political status of the former to that of the latter in the Ninth Symphony. The *Hirtenreigen* can be seen in this specific light as not dissimilar to Wagner’s conception of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” – an invented folk theme that, despite its subsequent art-music treatment, nevertheless speaks to a general folk “consciousness.” Wagner ensures the perception of the exposition of the *Hirtenreigen* as a folk melody (albeit an invented one) through his use of modal inflection and Bar form.

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<sup>12</sup> Janet K. Page, et al., “Oboe,” *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed April 6, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music” Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 203.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Wagner, *Beethoven*, trans. Albert R. Parsons (Indianapolis: Benham Brothers, 1873), 92.

The tune exhibits distinct modal aspects which give it a folk affiliation. The prominent “natural” seventh scale degree (E flat) of F minor occurring after the opening leaps of a fifth and minor third, to be referred to here as “The Call” motive (see Example 2), is particularly distinctive after the passage that immediately precedes it.

**Example 2. The first four measures of the *Hirtenreigen*, Act III, Scene 1, showing “The Call” motive.<sup>15</sup>**



The rise and fall of the violins in the preceding eight measures, what Roger North calls the “empty sea” figure, features a prominent E natural as part of the C dominant harmony that prepares the English horn’s entrance in F minor.<sup>16</sup> The absence of the expected leading tone, E natural, in the initial part of the *Hirtenreigen*, highlighted by the conspicuous melodic gestures of ascending and descending augmented seconds in the “empty sea” material, further enhances the modal quality of the Shepherd’s tune (specifically, the Aeolian mode). The next modal inflection occurs in the eighth measure of the melody where a G flat acts as a long passing tone between the supertonic and tonic scale degrees (see Example 3). G flat, as we will see, is a particular *idée fixe* in the *Hirtenreigen* and plays an important role as a tonal center in the subsequent use of the tune during Tristan’s “Muss ich dich so verstehen” monologue further in the scene.

**Example 3. Measures 5-9 of the *Hirtenreigen*, Act III, Scene 1.<sup>17</sup>**



<sup>15</sup> Wagner, *Tristan*, 466.

<sup>16</sup> Roger North, *Wagner's Most Subtle Art: An Analytic Study of Tristan und Isolde* (London: Roger North, 1996), 501.

<sup>17</sup> Wagner, *Tristan*, 466.

In contrast to this modal instance where the G flat acts as a passing tone, this pitch is used elsewhere in the exposition of the tune in its traditional role in common-practice harmonic motion: as part of an implied predominant Neapolitan chord. At these points, the G flat eschews a modal quality. However, in m. 8, the surprising chromatic motion of the flattened second scale degree which moves to the tonic heightens the folk quality of this phrase by giving it an unmistakably Phrygian flavor.

A second aspect of the *Hirtenreigen* that gives it a quality of being from the past is its formal structure. In his comprehensive study of form in Wagner's operas, Alfred Lorenz gives a formal analysis of this interlude which reveals that, while elements of the passage give the impression of an improvisatory solo, the *Hirtenreigen* exhibits a three-part traditional Bar form (AAB).<sup>18</sup> Lorenz's conception of Bar form is based on material from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, specifically Walther von Stolzing's "Prize Song" in Act III, Scene 2.<sup>19</sup> The Bar form, usually two *Stollen* followed by an *Abgesang*, and its terminology was subsequently adopted within the musicological lexicon following Lorenz's studies and has been found to be an important formal aspect of the songs of such medieval traditions as the *troubadours* and *trouvères* in France, as well as the *Minnesinger* and *Meistersinger* in Germany.<sup>20</sup> Regarding *Die Meistersinger*, G. M. Tucker finds that Wagner's use of this form was "in a deliberate attempt to imitate the medieval design."<sup>21</sup> Following these medieval associations, Wagner's use of the form in the *Hirtenreigen*, along with the aforementioned modal quality, can similarly be considered a pointed evocation of the "ancient."

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<sup>18</sup> Alfred Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner, Band II: Der musikalische Aufbau von Richard Wagners 'Tristan und Isolde'*, (Tutzing: Scheider, 1966), 135.

<sup>19</sup> Horst Brunner, "Bar form," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed October 6, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> G. M. Tucker, "Bar form," *The Oxford Companion to Music, Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed October 6, 2013.



As Lorenz suggests, the tune is in two parts: a first section consisting of two *Stollen* and a balancing second section that fulfills the function of *Abgesang* (see Example 4). These sections are delineated by their thematic content and symmetrical length: the combined *Stollen* section (AA) and the *Abgesang* (B) are both 21 measures in length. The first and second *Stollen* display parallel openings consisting of "The Call" motive as their basis (see Example 4). As well, the first *Stollen* exhibits an internal symmetry of structure, initially seeming to be in simple 4 + 4 measure phrases. When this does not come to fruition (the phrase is elongated by the aforementioned G flat in mm. 8-9 of Example 4), it has a surprising effect. Similarly, the second *Stollen* begins with the expectation of internal symmetry: its opening four measures recall "The Call" motive and are elided with an inversion of the same motive which spins out into a prolongation of the dominant (via an implied Neapolitan neighbor harmony, mm. 16-19 of Example 4). After a *fortissimo* on an implied dominant in m. 21 of Example 4, which serves to delineate sections, the *Abgesang* begins with modal and chromatic harmony developing the "Triplet Theme" from *Stollen* 1. The chromaticism of this passage and the rhythmic irregularity of the "Triplet Theme" motive, combined with an *accelerando*, give the *Abgesang* a fantasy quality. Yet, it too ends with a four-measure cadential phrase based on "The Call" motive in inversion. Appropriately, Wagner's stylistic treatment of the tune gives the impression of a loose, semi-improvised performance while motivic and dynamic markers, along with a large-scale symmetry, attest to an AAB structure of standard Bar form. Thus, even though Wagner does not specify that the Shepherd is on stage during the exposition of the *Hirtentreigen* played "auf dem Theater" (we only realize that it is the Shepherd who is playing the tune when Wagner's stage directions instruct him to appear after the exposition of the tune), by design, one can hear a musical presence of a folk performer improvising on the traditional form of an *alte Weise*. As we shall see, this "ancient" presence is imperative to Wagner's dramatic aim for Scene 1, Act III.

Example 4. The *Hirtenreigen*, Act III, Scene 1, showing Bar form structure and thematic content.

**Stollen 1** (9 mm.)

4 mm. 5 mm.

1 "The Call" VI V i  $\sharp$ VII "Triplet Motive" VI V/V V

**Stollen 2** (12 mm.)

4 mm. 8 mm.

10 ("The Call") i... ("The Call" inverted) *ff*

**Abgesang** (21 mm.)

10 mm.

22 III (development of "Triplet Motive") V/V' V

6 mm. 4 mm.

32 "The Walt" V (♭II) V ("The Call" inverted)

## Narrative Levels in Tristan's "Muss ich dich so verstehen"

The monophonic presentation of the *Hirtenreigen* in its totality at the opening of the scene is the musical means by which Wagner probes Tristan's past. Joseph Kerman has noted that the opening of this scene occurs in a "large symmetrical double cycle"<sup>22</sup> in which Tristan passes through four psychological states: recollection, curse, relapse, and anticipation.<sup>23</sup> At the first hearing of the *Hirtenreigen*, Tristan begins Kerman's "recollection" phase by initiating a vague introspection, but "he remembers no events yet, only this torturing complex of feeling – day, life, yearning, pain."<sup>24</sup> It is only with the second cycle (also instigated by the *Hirtenreigen*) that Tristan engages in what Žižek calls a "proto-Freudian self-analysis" in which he accepts "full responsibility for his fate."<sup>25</sup> Kerman describes the passage:

The Shepherd's piping, *die alte Weise*, had wakened Tristan for his struggle; now it is heard again to begin the new cycle. This time Tristan's eyes are clear. He can penetrate into the events of his past and seek their significance, not only those that we already know from the opera, but also events from his childhood and even before, symbolized by the rich gloomy strain of the Shepherd, playing as he played when Tristan's mother and father died.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 200.

<sup>23</sup> This has been taken up by subsequent scholars. See Žižek, "Deeper Than the Day"; and Eric Chafe, *The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 237-241.

<sup>24</sup> Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 200.

<sup>25</sup> Žižek, "Deeper Than the Day," 128.

<sup>26</sup> Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 201.

The revelation that Tristan had culpability in his parents' deaths occurs in Tristan's retrospective "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue.

In terms of the text, the opening section of this monologue is essentially an embedded narrative: Tristan, a character in a story, recalls the *story* of his parents' deaths. The musical setting of this passage, however, is more complex. At various points throughout "Muss ich dich so verstehen" we hear the melodic material of the *Hirtenreigen* in three guises: in its original instrumentation (on-stage English horn) with light tremolo accompaniment, in various types of orchestration and harmonic settings, and in the well-documented technique of the leitmotif. To make sense of these treatments of the *Hirtenreigen* and define their relationship with the embedded narrative of the text, we can turn to theories of narrative level within structural narratology.

Gérard Genette's seminal work in structural narratology in the 1970s and 1980s refuted the traditional view of narration as "identifying the narrating instance with the instance of 'writing,' the narrator with the author, and the recipient of the narrative with the reader of the work."<sup>27</sup> For Genette, to analyse literary works that have a variable and multifaceted narrative aspect (such as Proust's *À la Recherche Du Temps Perdu*), a more nuanced theory is needed.<sup>28</sup> His highly influential publication *Narrative Discourse* (originally published as an essay "Discours du récit" in his *Figures III* in 1972)<sup>29</sup> presents his "theory of narrative levels" as a result of having "simply systematized the traditional notion of 'embedding.'"<sup>30</sup> In *Narrative*

<sup>27</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 213.

<sup>28</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 214.

<sup>29</sup> Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).

<sup>30</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 84. Originally published as *Nouveau discours du récit* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983).

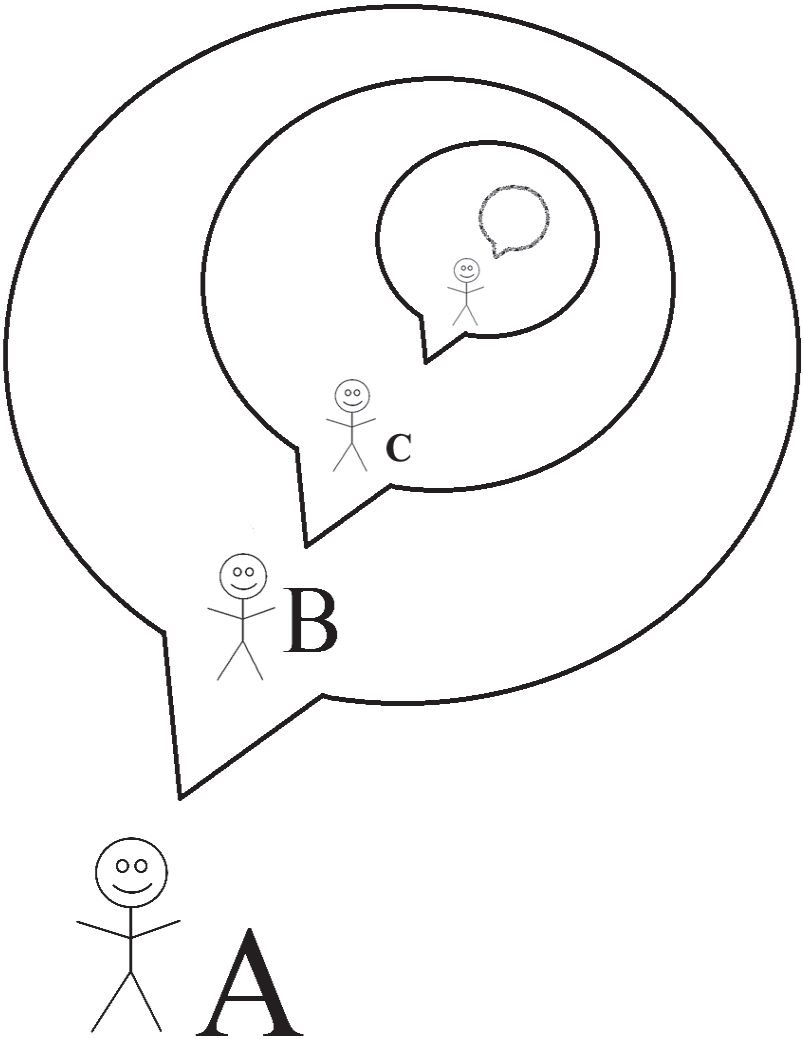
*Discourse Revisited*, Genette provides an explanatory model for the way these levels of narrative are embedded which references the “balloon-shapes” used within comic strips (see Figure 1, which is based on Genette’s model).<sup>31</sup> Paraphrasing Genette’s explanatory model, one can see that an extradiegetic narrator A emits a balloon which encompasses diegetic character B.<sup>32</sup> This character B could then narrate a metadiegetic narrative that includes character C (this “embedding” of narrative within a narrative could continue *ad infinitum*).

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<sup>31</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 85.

<sup>32</sup> While nominally derived from Plato’s concept of *diegesis* (to contrast the concept of *mimesis*) its modern connotation was coined by film music pioneer, Étienne Souriau, and refined by Genette. See David Neumeyer, “Diegetic/Nondiegetic: A Theoretical Model,” *Music and the Moving Image* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 27.

**Figure 1.** Genette’s embedded levels of narrative where A is the extradiegetic narrative level, B is the diegetic narrative level, and C is the metadiegetic narrative level.



Using Genette's definitions we can deem the initial section of Tristan's "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue (see Figure 2) as beginning in the diegetic narrative level, transforming to the meta-diegetic level, and returning to the diegetic level.

**Figure 2.** The text for the opening section of Tristan's "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue.<sup>33</sup>

Muss ich dich so verstehn, du alte ernste Weise, mit deiner Klage Klang? Durch Abendwehen drang sie bang, als einst dem Kind des Vaters Tod verkündet: - durch Morgengrauen bang und bänger, als der Sohn der Mutter Los vernahm. Da er mich zeugt' und starb, sie sterbend mich gebar, - die alte Weise sehnsuchtbang zu ihnen wohl auch klagend drang, die einst mich frug, und jetzt mich fragt: zu welchem Los erkoren, ich damals wohl geboren? Zu welchem Los?	Must I understand you thus, you ancient, solemn tune with your plaintive tones? Through the evening air it came, fearfully, as once it brought news to the child of his father's death. Through the grey light of morning, ever more fearful, as the son became aware of his mother's lot. As he begat me and died, so, dying, she bore me. That ancient tune of anxious yearning sounded its lament to them too, asking me then, and asking me now, for what fate was I then born? For what fate?
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<sup>33</sup> Wagner, *Tristan*, 518-522. The English translations in this article are taken from Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde (Tristano e Isotta)* (Kitabu, 2012), Act Three, accessed July 17, 2014, Kindle Editions.

As a character in the opera narrative, Tristan's direct reference to the Hirtenreigen – "Muss ich dich so verstehen du alte ernste Weise..." ["Must I understand you thus, you ancient, solemn tune..."] – occurs on the diegetic level. However, as soon as he starts his story of his parents' deaths, his reference to hearing the Hirtenreigen announce his father's death is in the metadiegetic narrative level. Finally, at the end of this excerpt when Tristan finds the "ancient tune" imploring him to answer "Zu welchem Los?" ["For what fate?"], the diegetic narrative level has returned. He is no longer recounting a story. Rather, he is contemplating his fate out loud. In Carolyn Abbate's in-depth exploration of narrativity in opera, it is stated:

All operas have scenes of narration, scenes in which a character tells a story. But, what, meanwhile, is being done by and with the music? Put another way: what occurs at this juncture that brings music together with a representation of the scene of narration?<sup>34</sup>

To answer this, one can turn to concepts in film music studies following structural narratology.

In her study of the way music is treated in film, Claudia Gorbman adopts Genette's concepts of extradiegetic (Gorbman writes "nondiegetic" but it is a difference of terminology), diegetic, and metadiegetic narrative levels.<sup>35</sup> These concepts have been

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<sup>34</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 61.

<sup>35</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 22.



further adopted to apply to music in opera.<sup>36</sup> As film studies scholar David Neumeyer elaborates, sound that “fails to be positioned securely in relation to spatial coordinates” within the narrative is extradiegetic.<sup>37</sup> This would account for the vast majority of music in operatic works. It also provides a narrative orientation for the Wagnerian leitmotif. Like most music produced by the operatic orchestra, the leitmotif is not spatially located in the narrative world itself, and thus it is extradiegetic.<sup>38</sup> However, due to its unique function “to represent or symbolize a person, object, place, idea, state of mind, supernatural force or any other ingredient in a dramatic work,” where non-leitmotivic orchestral passages can blur the boundary between narrative levels, the leitmotif is particularly fixed to the extradiegetic level.<sup>39</sup> Gorbman defines diegetic music to be “music that (apparently) issues from a source within the narrative.”<sup>40</sup> Diegetic music, a phenomenon that is common in opera,

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<sup>36</sup> For a handful of studies using the concept of narrative levels in opera see Robbert Adrianus Jacobus van der Lek, *Diegetic Music in Opera and Film: A Similarity Between Two Genres of Drama Analyzed in Works by Erick Wolfgang Korngold* (Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1991); Matt Baileyshea, “The Struggle for Orchestral Control: Power, Dialogue, and the Role of the Orchestra in Wagner’s *Ring*,” *19th-Century Music* 31, no. 1 (2007): 3-27; and William Cheng, “Opera *en Abyme*: The Prodigious Ritual of Korngold’s *Die tote Stadt*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 22, no. 2 (2011): 115-146. In instrumental music, see Vera Micznik, “Music and Narrative Revisited: Degrees of Narrativity in Beethoven and Mahler,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 126, no. 2 (2001): 193-249; and Elizabeth Paley, “‘The Voice Which Was My Music’: Narrative and Nonnarrative Musical Discourse in Schumann’s ‘Manfred,’” *19th-Century Music* 24, no. 1 (Summer, 2000): 3-20.

<sup>37</sup> Neumeyer, “Diegetic/Nondiegetic,” 26.

<sup>38</sup> For a fascinating re-evaluation of the narrative function of the leitmotif, see Baileyshea, “The Struggle for Orchestral Control.”

<sup>39</sup> Arnold Whittall, “Leitmotif,” *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed February 11, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 22.

occurs three times in *Tristan*.<sup>41</sup> Kerman notes the significance of the instances of diegetic music occurring at the opening of each act (the Sailor's song of the opening of Act I, Mark and Melot's hunting calls in Act II, and the *Hirtenreigen* in Act III) and notes the increasing degree of musical importance in each instance.<sup>42</sup> He states, "These musical ideas are all symbolic, and permeate the beginnings of the act in question – most profoundly in the case of the Shepherd's '*alte Weise*' of Act III."<sup>43</sup> The two common musical narrative levels (diegetic and extradiegetic) are contrasted with the more exceptional level, what Gorbman (following Genette) calls metadiegetic music: those sounds that are "imagined by the character in the film," such as in a dream or flashback.<sup>44</sup> Here, the character "'takes over' part of the film's narration and we are privileged to read his musical thoughts."<sup>45</sup>

Film music scholar, Robynn J. Stilwell, has deemed the transitions between these narrative levels to be of "great narrative and experiential import."<sup>46</sup> As she states, "the border region – the fantastical gap – is a transformative space, a superposition, a transition between stable states."<sup>47</sup> This permeability of border between narrative levels is not exclusive to film music. Abbate has noted that, in some cases of

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<sup>41</sup> There are numerous examples of diegetic music in opera that range from the earliest canonical works, such as the lyre-playing hero in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, to the three onstage chamber orchestras during the ballroom scene in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

<sup>42</sup> Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 197.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>46</sup> Robynn J. Stilwell, "The Fantastical Gap Between Diegetic and Nondiegetic," in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, eds. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, Richard Leppert (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007), 200.

<sup>47</sup> Stilwell, "The Fantastical Gap," 200.

narrative song in opera, “a border that is usually clearly marked – the border between music that the characters do not hear and are not aware of singing, and songs that they can hear – has been dissolved.”<sup>48</sup> This is particularly so in Wagnerian opera. She states,

Wagner’s dissolution of this border created opera in which the characters live in a realm animated by music that they at times seem to hear, at times to invent.... Elusive as it is, the illusion of the character who *hears* is a characteristic element of Wagner’s language. Act III of *Tristan* is born of this illusion; when the “*Alte Weise*” passes into the orchestra during the second part of *Tristan*’s narrative, we are aware that the music we hear comes from *Tristan*, that we are hearing what he hears as he lingers at the edge of our world.<sup>49</sup>

Wagner musically exploits all three narrative levels in *Tristan*’s “*Muss ich dich so verstehen*” monologue of Scene 1, of Act III. As it will be shown, these levels are not strict and exclusive from each other but, rather, they are situated along a gradient.

### **The Extradiegetic Narrative Level: The *Hirtenreigen* as Leitmotif**

As the leitmotif, corresponding to the extradiegetic level, is the most well-known narrative technique, we will explore it first. A prominent example of material from the *Hirtenreigen* used in the extradiegetic level is when *Tristan* initially rises from his comatose state (when *Kurvenal* reminds him that he is in the ancestral surroundings of his father). *Tristan* exclaims “*Meiner Vater?*” directly after which the first six notes of “*The Call*” motive are heard in

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<sup>48</sup> Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 117.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-118.

the oboe.<sup>50</sup> This marks the first time that “The Call” material has strayed from its original instrumentation, key, and harmonic setting (see Example 5).

**Example 5. “The Call” motive transformed into a leitmotif (in the oboe) in Scene 1, Act III.<sup>51</sup>**

Tristan: Mei - ner Vät - er? Kurw.: Sich dich nur um!

"The Call"

Oboe

F#<sup>7</sup> B D<sup>3</sup>

4 Tristan: Was er - klang mir?

Fr<sup>6</sup> Bb<sup>6</sup>

Up to this point, we have heard the tune in its original unaccompanied form and key of F minor, directly before Tristan awakes earlier in the scene. It is clear that, at this earlier point, the tune is present in the diegetic level: Tristan hears the piping within the narrative. He directly references it: “Die alte Weise; - was weckt sie mich? [That old tune? Why does it waken me? ].”<sup>52</sup> However, at Tristan’s reference to his father, as opposed to earlier in the scene, the tune is operating on the extradiegetic narrative level. Tristan is not hearing the Shepherd’s piping within the action of the

<sup>50</sup> Wagner, *Tristan*, 474.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 470.

narrative (note that Tristan asks “Was erklang mir?” [“What rang me?”] in the past tense and, likewise, Kurwenal replies “Des Hirten Weise hörtest du wieder” [“The Shepherd’s tune you were hearing”],<sup>53</sup> also in the past tense) yet “The Call” is informing the dramatic content of the narrative. As such, “The Call” in this leitmotif setting retains its shape (a leap of a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> followed by a leap of a third then a descend of a second), but it is harmonized over a second-inversion D dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord and a French augmented 6<sup>th</sup> chord, which acts as predominant to the dominant of B flat major – a very chromatic harmonic setting (see Example 5), vastly different than the implied harmony of the *Hirtenreigen* exposition. Furthermore, the fact that Wagner gives the tune to the oboe, a double-reed instrument of the same family, directly references the instrumentation of “The Call” in its initial instance. In effect, the passage represents the birth of “The Call” as a leitmotif. Its placement directly after Tristan’s reference to his father imbues this motive with a dramatic association of Tristan’s parents.

In true Wagnerian style, the composer capitalizes on this association at a crucial moment later in the “Muss ich dich so verstehen” monologue: the instant when Tristan realizes his fate has been sealed since his own mother’s death during his birth – “Die alte Weise sagt mir’s wieder: mich sehnen - und sterben!” [“The ancient tune tells me once more: to yearn - and to die!”].<sup>54</sup> His first instinct is to deny this in disbelief: “Nein! Ach nein! So heist sie nicht!” [“No! Ah, no! That is not it!”].<sup>55</sup> At this point, after extensive use of the *Hirtenreigen* in its original form (as will be detailed below), “The Call” leitmotif is blasted by the high winds (*sehr gehalten*) in counterpoint with what is often referred to as the “Day” motive in the horns (see Example 6).<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 474-475.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 523.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 523.

<sup>56</sup> North, *Wagner’s Most Subtle Art*, 509.



makes this dramatic end so clear. In addition to this technique, Wagner uses the *Hirtenreigen* earlier in the "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue in a way that retains more of its large scale structure as it oscillates from moment to moment between the diegetic and metadiegetic levels.

### The Diegetic and Metadiegetic Narrative Levels

In the most practical sense, Wagner employs the *Hirtenreigen* as a dramatic device to introduce Tristan's past into the narrative of the opera. As stated above, at the moment that Tristan becomes conscious, the *Hirtenreigen* is used in its exclusively diegetic state – it occurs within the world of the drama. Besides the fact that Tristan refers to the tune directly ("Die alte Weise; - was weckt sie mich?"<sup>59</sup>), its narrative status is evident because Wagner assigns the diegetic piping of the tune a musical identity: the presentation of the *Hirtenreigen* material in unaccompanied or minimally accompanied English horn emitted from the stage. Simply put, when Tristan hears the piping of the *alte Weise*, he is simultaneously awakened from his comatose state and reminded of his parents' deaths. This sets the stage for the dramatic material of the scene: Tristan's expectation of Isolde's ship and the realization of his fate of death due to the implication he had in the deaths of his mother and father.

The revelation of Tristan's role in his parents' demise occurs in the "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue of the same scene. This "penetration of events of his past," as Kerman writes, is achieved through Wagner's musical treatment of the tune during this monologue.<sup>60</sup> Through orchestration of the *Hirtenreigen* material, the gradual and episodic progression from the diegetic narrative level

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>60</sup> Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 201.

to the metadiegetic level is attained in order to musically enhance the approach to the frontier of Tristan's internal consciousness. At the onset of the "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue, as in the earlier part of the scene when Tristan initially awakes, "The Call" motive is preceded by a statement of the "The Wail" by the English horn from the stage, with light accompaniment by tremolo strings on a B flat pedal. Here, the diegetic presence of the tune signals Isolde's absence, as the Shepherd was instructed to "spiele lustig und hell!" ["play merrily and clearly"]<sup>61</sup> on seeing her ship. More important for Wagner's dramatic aims, it triggers associative memories of the deaths of Tristan's parents and is thus the beginning of the progression to Tristan's internal sphere and the metadiegetic narrative level. This is supported musically by the gradual increase of orchestration from the orchestra pit to the point of complete replacement of the on-stage English horn. In addition, there is a marked increase in the number of unexpected harmonies.

The first *Stollen* of the tune is recapitulated in full by the English horn with the light accompaniment of tremolo strings in expected diatonic harmony (in F minor) until Tristan's entrance (see Example 7).

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 469.



**Example 7. *Stollen 1*, *Stollen 2*, and the beginning of the *Abgesang* of the *Hirtenreigen* during the first 20 measures of Tristan's "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue.**

*Stollen 1*

EH.

Vls.

*Stollen 2*

7 Tristan: Muss ich dich so ver stehn

Vla. & Vc.

12 du al - te ern - ste Wei - se,

15 mit dein - er Kla - ge Klang?

Timp.

Bsn.

Abgesang -----

18 Durch A - bend - we - hend

23 drang sie bang, als einst dem Kind des Va - - ters

26 Tod ver - kün - det;

Ob. 3 Cl. 3 Ob. 3 Bsn. 3 Vla. & Vlc. 3 Hn. 3 E.H. 3 Hn. 3 Pizz. Vlc. & Bcl.

At Tristan's entrance, the G flat of this *Stollen* (upon which he begins "Muss ich dich so verstehn...?" ["Must I understand you thus...?"])<sup>62</sup> that was so surprising in the exposition of the tune is softened by a chromatic descent with suspensions in the strings. The proceeding second *Stollen* also occurs in a different harmonic dress than the initial exposition of the tune. Most noticeably, the wail-like extension of the dominant in the second *Stollen* is re-harmonized as a dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord rooted on C with a flattened 5<sup>th</sup> (C7<sup>b</sup>5, mm. 16-19 of Example 7). The Neapolitan neighbor prolongation implied in the exposition of the *Hirtenreigen* does not occur (mm. 16-19 of Example 4). The orchestral forces (from the pit) increase with the addition of a timpani roll when Tristan narrates his story (on the final note of the second *Stollen* immediately before the *Abgesang* begins). Three measures after Tristan's metadiegetic recounting of his past begins, the development of the "Triplet Motive" is passed from the English horn to the oboe, clarinet and horn with bassoon accompaniment (in addition to the ever-present tremolo strings). The rhythmic augmentation of the opening of the *Abgesang* in addition to the variable orchestration thereby brings the tune completely into the internal sphere of Tristan's memory (see Example 7). Over these five measures ("...drang sie bang, als einst dem Kind des Vaters Tod verkündet..." ["...it came, fearfully, as once it brought news to the child of his father's death..."]<sup>63</sup>), Tristan is reliving the memory of the tune – the diegetic narrative level is displaced by the metadiegetic narrative level in both the textual *and* musical elements of the opera. This metadiegetic episode of the musical setting is "popped" immediately after Tristan reveals his father's death (one of Wagner's dramatic priorities). At this point, the pizzicato G in the basses (the "pop," m. 28 of Example 7) combined with *sforzandi* in the horn

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 519.

and bass clarinet initiates the return of the on-stage English horn and *Abgesang* material continues again with light accompaniment: the music has slid back towards the diegetic level (the light accompaniment of the orchestra prevents a complete reverting to the diegetic level). Thus, as Tristan's text continues in the metadiegetic narrative level ("Durch Morgengrauen bang und bänger, als der Sohn der Mutter Los vernahm" ["Through the grey light of morning, ever more fearful, as the son became aware of his mother's lot."]),<sup>64</sup> the musical setting of the text oscillates in and out of the metadiegetic level – in and out of Tristan's memory of the past. Wagner portrays these musical transformations to and from the diegetic and metadiegetic levels through his orchestration, rhythmic variation, and harmonic setting of the *Hirtenreigen*.

The proceeding passage of the "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue represents the next plunge into Tristan's consciousness and results in an extended musical passage in the most wholly metadiegetic level yet: when Tristan divulges his mother's death ("Da er mich zeugt' und starb, sie sterbend mich gebar" ["As he begat me and died, so, dying, she bore me"]).<sup>65</sup> Here, the *Hirtenreigen* is presented in its most divergent form in comparison to the exposition (see Example 8).

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 519-520.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 520.

**Example 8. *Hirtenreigen* material presented in G flat during the "Muss ich dich so verstehen" monologue.**

Tristan: ...ver - nahm. Da er mich zeugt' und starb, sie

The "Wail"

E.H. 3 3 Vln. Bcl. "The Call"

6 sterb - end mich ge - bar, die al - te

Stollen 2 Ob.

9 Wei - se sehn - - sucht - bang zu ihn - en wohl auch

Cl.

12 kla - gendrang, die einst mich frug und jetzt mich fragt: zu

"Triplet Motive" -----

Ob. 3

17 wel - chem Los er - ko - ren, ich da - mals wohl ge - bo - ren?

"The Wail" -----

Cl. Ob. 3 Cl.

21 Zu wel chem Los? Die al - te...

Ob.+Cl. 3 Hn+Bsn. 3

Stollen 2 E.H.

It is in a different key (initially G flat major which gives way to G flat minor) and played by orchestral instruments other than the English horn (first by the bass clarinet and then exchanged between the oboe and clarinet). Although the key center returns to F minor at the mention of the “*klagend drang*” of the tune, this metadiegetic episode does not subside until Tristan questions his own fate at “*Zu welchem Los?*”<sup>66</sup>

The episode achieves its movement away from F minor via a chromatic and harmonically unstable passage. This is initialized by the G flat at the end of “The Wail” motive acting as a common tone between the dominant C7<sup>b5</sup> chord and the proceeded C flat chord (at “*Da er mich zeugt*” in mm. 3-4 in Example 8).<sup>67</sup> The C flat chord, in turn, acts as the dominant of F flat major as the bass clarinet sounds the “The Call” motive (via a third-relation, an E flat major chord) and a modified statement of the second *Stollen* is iterated in G flat (without preparation of a dominant). Approaching the harmonic progression of this section from a broader view, this second *Stollen* occurs within a temporary and unstable G flat key area (Wagner writes F sharp) as an expansion of the G flat in the exposition of the tune (after “The Wail” motive) within an overall F minor tonality. The modulation back to F minor is also achieved through highly chromatic motion during the “Triplet Motive” material from *Stollen* 1, resulting in the dominant of F minor for the “The Wail” material as Tristan comprehends his destiny (“*zu welchem Los erken, ich damals wohl geboren? Zu welchem Los?*” [“For what fate was I then born? For what fate?”]).<sup>68</sup> Both motives are rhythmically augmented. Immediately after this, the second *Stollen* returns in the English horn (in F minor) and the final material of the *Abgesang*

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 520.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 521-522.

("The Call" inverted) finishes on a strong cadence ("Die alte Weise sagt mir's wieder: mich sehnen - und sterben!") ["The ancient tune tells me once more: to yearn - and to die!"].<sup>69</sup> The textual content of Tristan's monologue at "Zu welchem Los?" and the music both occur once again at the diegetic narrative level (the immediacy of his self-questioning in the text indicates that it is not part of his meta-diegetic narrative).

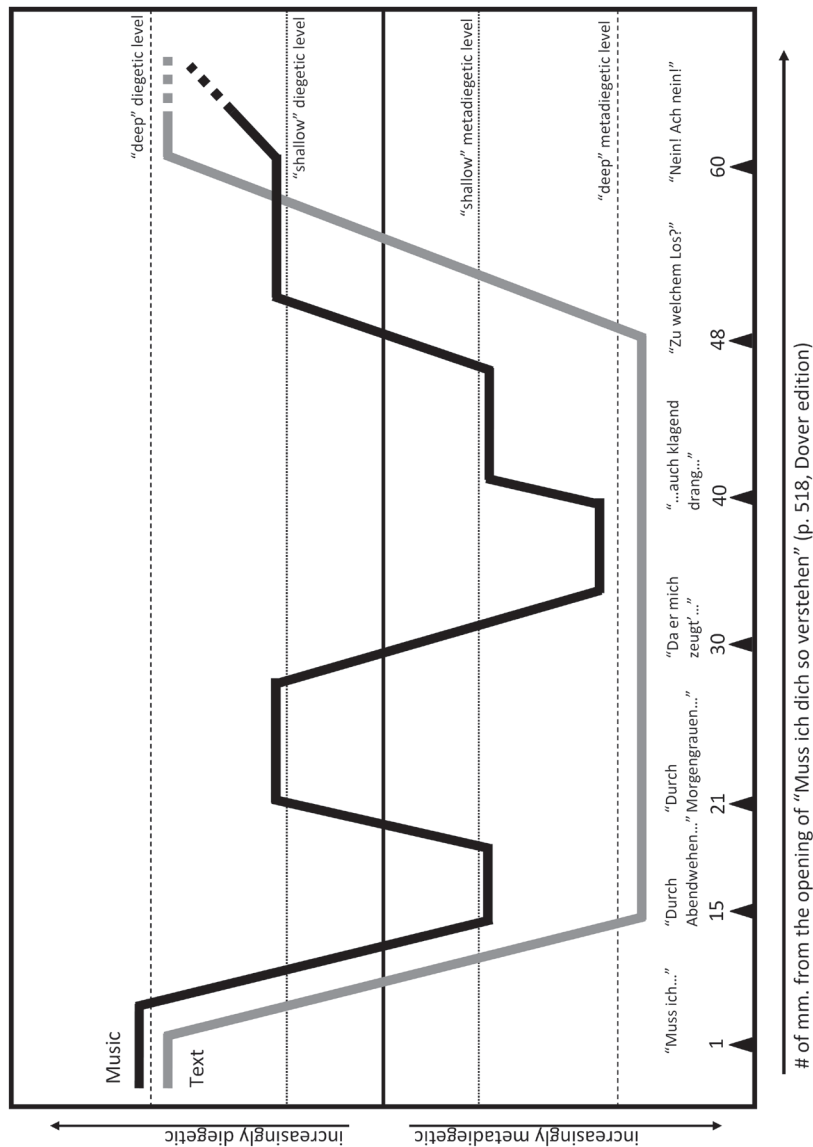
Figure 3 graphically summarizes the previous analysis. It compares the progressive transition through narrative levels of the musical material with that of the textual material. The exposition of the *Hirtenreigen* provides an initial expectation of key, harmony, and orchestration that is withheld later in the scene. The degree of transformation of the *Hirtenreigen* material via harmonic setting, orchestration and key controls the oscillation between the diegetic and metadiegetic level of the narrative while the textual content of Tristan's monologue remains statically metadiegetic. Essentially, Wagner's technique here intensifies the overall metadiegesis of strategic points in the monologue as Tristan's probes his own internal sphere and, thus, brings his past to the fore.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 522.



**Figure 3.** Graphic summary of the changing narrative levels of the music and text in the first section of the “Muss ich dich so verstehen” monologue.



This pattern of musically passing from the diegetic level to the metadiegetic level begins in a very similar way at the next iteration of the *Hirtenreigen* from the on-stage English horn (after Tristan exclaims “Im Sterben mich zu sehnen, vor Sehnsucht nicht zu sterben!” [“While dying to yearn, but not to die of yearning!”]).<sup>70</sup> Just as in the beginning of the monologue, when Tristan continues the metadiegetic narration of his monologue recounting past events involving Isolde (“Die nie erstirbt, sehrend nun ruft um Sterbens Ruh’ sie der fernen Ärztin zu” [“Never dying, yearning, calling out for the peace of death to the far-away physician”]),<sup>71</sup> the musical setting of the tune is taken up by the orchestra in a variety of instrumentations and key areas. However, unlike the first cycle in which the tune returns to the diegetic sphere – the “reality” of the opera’s dramatic world – the *Hirtenreigen* remains in the metadiegetic and extradiegetic levels (leitmotifs) until it is completely expunged from the opera at “Der Trank! Der Trank! Der furchtbarer Trank!” [“The draught! The draught! The fearful draught!”].<sup>72</sup> If, at the opening of the act, Tristan was “no longer at home in reality,” suspended between “daily life” and “the blissful domain of the night,”<sup>73</sup> then at the end of the “Muss ich dich so verstehen” monologue, Wagner’s musical treatment shows that our hero has surrendered to the night and to his fate of death.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 526-527.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 532-533.

<sup>73</sup> Žižek, “Deeper Than the Day,” 127.

## Conclusion

Drawing on passages of Wagner's writings that juxtapose the possible genetic source of the *Hirtenreigen* and the composer's synthesis of Schopenhauer's philosophy on music and dreams, Nattiez makes the following claim: "There is no doubt that we are intended to interpret the Shepherd's *alte Weise* within the context of this [Schopenhauerian] metaphysical approach to dreams and music."<sup>74</sup> Nattiez finds that,

For Tristan death is the kingdom where he could finally forget and no longer be plagued by desire, but the "ancient tune" reminds him that the death of his parents, doubly linked to his conception and birth, dooms him likewise to death. And this is something he can forget only in death itself.<sup>75</sup>

As it has been made clear, the *Hirtenreigen* is used by Wagner as an instrument to probe the depths of Tristan's memory, expose Tristan's (and therefore Isolde's) fate of death, and, thus, complete the Schopenhauerian puzzle.<sup>76</sup> In this way, it is not dissimilar to the famous opening "desire" sequence of the prelude to the opera which famously results in three statements of the "Tristan" chord in chromatic sequence, a passage that is strongly imbued with the *topoi* of desire and unrequited love. Like the *Hirtenreigen*, as the "desire" sequence returns throughout the opera at important dramatic points, it is dressed in a variety of guises and a variety of orchestrations – simultaneously *giving* meaning to the drama at any one point as well as *gaining* meaning. In this way, the *Hirtenreigen*

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<sup>74</sup> Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne*, 152.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>76</sup> For a full exploration of Wagner's debt to Schopenhauer in *Tristan und Isolde*, see Chafe, *The Tragic and the Ecstatic*.

can be viewed as a crucial balancing counterpart that is grounded in diegetic “reality” of the opera. As the “desire” sequence is used when the lovers initially accept their love in the final scene of Act 1, the *Hirtenreigen* is used when Tristan accepts his and Isolde’s fate of death as the Schopenhauerian culmination of eternal love.

Abbate identifies instances of the kind of musical narrative complexity described above in several of Wagner’s operas including *Der Fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, as well as *Tristan und Isolde*.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, Abbate sees the composer’s ability to manipulate the narrative level of the music of his operas as an “illusion” that was “one element of Wagner’s language that (unlike leitmotifs) few other later composers could mimic.”<sup>78</sup> It is easy to dismiss Hanslick’s negative comments regarding the “awful length” of the *Hirtenreigen* as anti-Wagnerian diatribe. Yet, in one way, there is something to Hanslick’s observation after all. For, although a complete occurrence of the *Hirtenreigen* is necessary for the achievement of the narrative “illusion” during its recapitulation throughout the “Muss ich dich so verstehen” monologue, the interlude comes very close to stagnating the pace of the opera. In this way, the *Hirtenreigen* represents Wagner’s extraordinary dedication to his Schopenhauerian dramatic priorities. Perhaps this is the reason that other opera composers had difficulty imitating Wagner’s narrative style: they lacked his idealist commitment. However, in another way, the drawn-out passage that Ernest Newman called “one of the strangest and most poignant ever imagined by man,”<sup>79</sup> fulfills a necessity of the drama even in its halting of the narrative progress. The exposition of the *Hirtenreigen* hangs the narrative of the opera in a timeless, mythological world which primes us for the events of the third act – an enigmatic world, but a Wagnerian one nonetheless.

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<sup>77</sup> Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 95-98.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>79</sup> Ernest Newman, *The Wagner Operas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 264.

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