

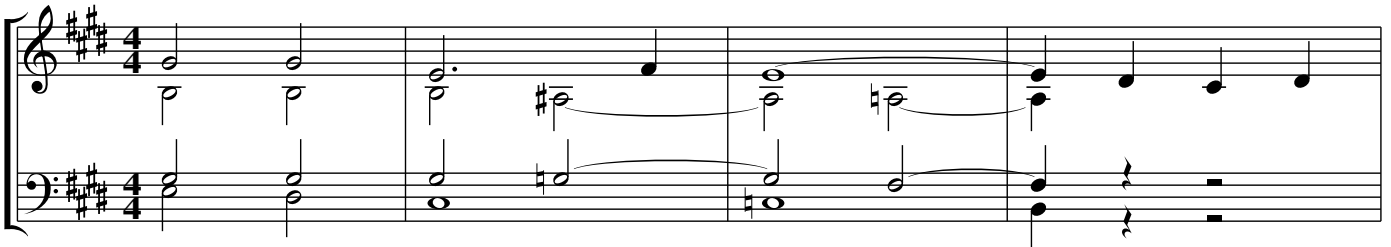
Old methods of 'chord construction' in Liszt's Resignazione and Wagner's Tristan.

1. Introduction

Resignazione (Resignation) was written by Franz Liszt in the Villa d'Este near Rome on 22nd October 1877. The composition – probably for piano or organ – consists of twenty-nine bars of a four-part choral-like texture. Liszt's horizontal way of composing, making subtle use of chromaticism, is striking.

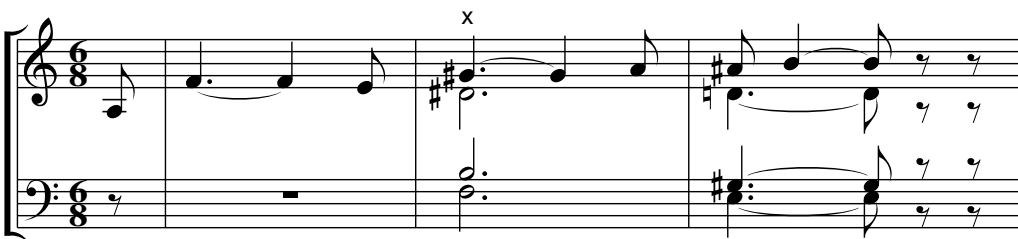
In this short text, I'll try to explain only the bars 1–4 from Resignazione in terms of old – in fact voice leading – methods, that we can find in many 18th century treatises on figured bass. Then – based on the outcomes – I'll try to give an explanation of the Tristan chord, the very first chord heard in Richard Wagner's opera Tristan und Isolde (1856 – 1859).

Bars 1 – 4 from Resignazione



Musical score for Bars 1–4 from Liszt's Resignazione. The score is in 4/4 time and D major. It consists of two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff. The music is written in a four-part texture. The first bar shows a simple chordal structure. The second bar introduces a chromatic movement in the bass line. The third and fourth bars continue this chromatic progression, with the bass line moving from G4 to F#4, E4, and D4.

The Tristan chord (x)



Musical score for The Tristan chord (x). The score is in 6/8 time and D major. It consists of two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff. The music is written in a four-part texture. The first bar shows a simple chordal structure. The second bar introduces a chromatic movement in the bass line. The third and fourth bars continue this chromatic progression, with the bass line moving from G4 to F#4, E4, and D4. The Tristan chord is marked with an 'x' above the treble staff in the third bar.

2. Method 1: 'Transitus regularis' and 'Transitus irregularis'

The 'Transitus regularis' is nowadays known as the unaccented passing note, the 'Transitus irregularis' as the accented passing note. Both are bridging the interval of a third between two notes essential to the harmony. Study the following basic 'transitus'—examples of Heinichen (1728).

3. Method 2: 'Anticipatio transitus' or anticipation of a passing note

Study first the following example of Heinichen (1728)

which can be explained from


The marked note E in the bass has been removed ('ellipsis') and replaced by the passing note or transitus D. It can be seen as an anticipation of transitus note D. Hence the name 'Anticipatio transitus'. Marpurg (1776) gives an example which demonstrates the anticipatio transitus in upper and lower voice.

which can be explained from

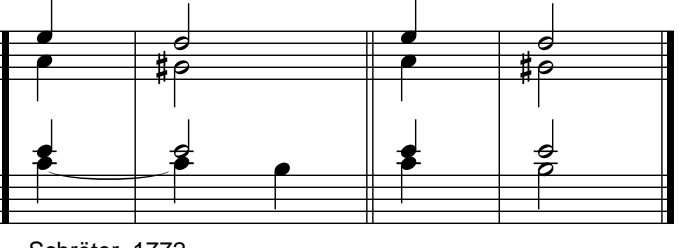
4. Method 3: 'Retardatio'

The third method mentioned in 18th century treatises is the retardatio, referring to the prolonging of one or more tones of a previous chord into the intermediate chord which follows. Four examples will suffice:

1 which can be explained from



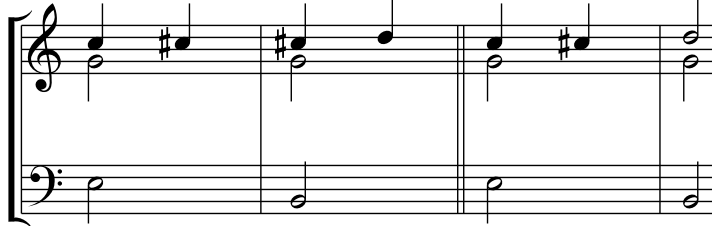
2 which can be explained from




Türk, 1791

Schröter, 1772

3 which can be explained from



4 which can be explained from



Bach, 1762

Bach, 1762

The free version of the retardatio is like an appoggiatura. Look at example 3 and skip the C# in bar 1 in the upper voice and you will create an appoggiatura.

Free retardatio = appoggiatura



which can be explained from

5. Analysis of Liszt's Resignazione

I shall apply the technique of 'simulated composition' to explain the harmonic progressions of the first bars of Liszt's Resignazione in terms of the foregoing 18th century methods.

Step 1

Basic model

I VI II $\frac{4}{3}$ V

Step 2

Adding passing notes (bar 1 and 2)

Step 3

Anticipatio transitus (bar 2)

Step 4

Adding passing note 1 (bar 2)

Step 5

Adding passing note 2 (bar 2)

Step 6

Adding passing note 3 (bar 3)

Step 7

Anticipatio transitus (bar 3)

Step 8

Retardatio inner voices (bar 2 and 3)

Step 9

Final things (bar 1, 2 and 4)

6. What about the Tristan Chord?

From the process of simulated composition, it will be clear that the 18th century techniques 'Transitus', 'Anticipatio transitus' and 'Retardatio' are adequate means to explain the harmonic progression in Liszt's Resignazione. It is so easy that one may wonder if the often discussed Tristan chord can be understood in this way. We have then to introduce an other 18th century technique first.

7. Method 4: 'Catachresis' or omitting a resolution

The 'catachresis' refers to omitting a chord that would be expected after a dischord. So an incorrect – however colourful – progression of a dischord is the result (catachresis: greek for 'misuse'). In the following example the chord with the mark 'x', which is the regular resolution of the preceding dominant seventh chord, is omitted.

which can be explained from

Kirnberger, 1771

The Tristan chord is a chord made up of the notes F, B, D# and G#, the with a 'x' marked chord below.

Many music theorists have tried to explain the Tristan chord. The solution of Chailly (in: Tristan et Isolde de Richard Wagner, Paris, 1963) is for me a serious one: "It [the Tristan chord] is rooted in a simple dominant chord of A minor, which includes two appoggiaturas resolved in the normal way...Tristan's chromaticism, grounded in appoggiaturas and passing notes, technically and spiritually represents an apogee of tension."

Solution Chailly (1963)

Musical notation showing two measures of a chord progression. The first measure contains a V chord (dominant) in the bass clef and a V chord in the treble clef. The second measure contains a V chord in the bass clef and a V chord in the treble clef. The chords are labeled 'V' below each measure.

However, I think there is a challenging alternative. In contrast to Chailly, I suppose that the basic model is the progression IV – V, from which we can simulate the composers' elaborations.

Step 1

Musical notation showing two measures of a basic model chord progression. The first measure contains an IV6 chord (subdominant in first inversion) in the bass clef and an IV6 chord in the treble clef. The second measure contains a V7 chord (dominant seventh) in the bass clef and a V7 chord in the treble clef. The chords are labeled 'IV6' and 'V7' below each measure. The text 'Basic model' is written above the first measure.

Step 2

Musical notation showing three measures of a chord progression. The first measure contains an IV6 chord in the bass clef and an IV6 chord in the treble clef. The second measure contains an IV6 chord in the bass clef and an IV6 chord in the treble clef. The third measure contains a V7 chord in the bass clef and a V7 chord in the treble clef. The text 'Adding a retardatio 1' is written above the first measure.

Step 3

Musical notation showing three measures of a chord progression. The first measure contains an IV6 chord in the bass clef and an IV6 chord in the treble clef. The second measure contains an IV6 chord in the bass clef and an IV6 chord in the treble clef. The third measure contains a V7 chord in the bass clef and a V7 chord in the treble clef. The text 'Adding a retardatio 2' is written above the first measure.

Step 4

Adding a retardatio 3

Step 5

Catachresis (omitting resolution bar 2 step 4)

Step 6

Final things: adding passing notes

8. Conclusion

Again, the 18th century methods transitus, retardatio and catachresis are excellent concepts to explain 19th century harmonic progressions. Let this be an inspiration to an easy way of musical analysis, rooted in the musical practice of the figured bass player. This practice has been consolidated in treatises of many theorists as Heinichen, C.P.E Bach, Kirnberger, Albrechtsberger, Sechter and Fétis. So the same way of thinking can be found in the practice of 19th century composers such as Beethoven, Brahms, Liszt, Wagner, Bruckner and Franck – to mention only a few – who are in fact pupils of the great composer J.S. Bach, whose music has its roots in the figured bass practice.

About the author:

Reinier Maliepaard, psychologist, software engineer, musician and teacher at the ArtEZ Conservatorium Netherlands (music theory and music history). Maliepaard maintains several internetsites as www.bestmusicteacher.com en www.artezmusictools.nl.

His freeware music notation programm MC Musiceditor (Windows) can be downloaded at www.mcmusiceditor.com

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