1 Elgar and theories of chromaticism

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Of the various meta-narratives about the history of Western tonal music, two are especially familiar: in the realm of culture, the story of the development of the German canon to a position of ascendancy in Europe by the late nineteenth century; and in the realm of musical language, the story of the chromaticization of this music from the time of Corelli, Handel, and Bach, to that of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, to that of Liszt and Wagner, and finally to that of Strauss, Debussy, Schoenberg – and Elgar. Even if we tend to grant less authority to such meta-narratives than we used to, the place of Elgar in the European constellation of art music is nevertheless clear. He is an English composer of the turn of the twentieth century, his music steeped in both the diatonicism of Handel and the chromatic harmony of Wagner and Strauss. Culturally, he is a post-Wagnerian tonal composer, one whose principal concert works were written with the explicit intent of gaining the power and prestige – both for himself and for England – of admission into what James Hepokoski has called ‘the now reified, culturally politicized, and largely Germanic canon’.¹ Musically, he is, to be sure, an English composer, and thus somewhat removed from the centres of power; but he is one who understood that a central feature – possibly the central feature – of the advanced, German music of his time was chromaticism. That his music was championed by the likes of Richard Strauss and Hans Richter early in the twentieth century, not to mention that it so deeply moves us to this day, is in no small part due to his extraordinary capacity for making chromatic writing his own. His chromatic usage is technically as adept as that of his German peers, and it is expressive and communicative in a way that is uniquely his. He was a composer who, like his immediate Germanic models, had an uncanny knack for making the most sturdy diatonicism and the most daring chromaticism work together beautifully in the same piece.

But how did he do it? Why is his use of chromatic harmony and chromatic tonal relations so powerful? There is a way, of course, in which we have known for years how chromaticism works for Elgar. For him, and for many

Elgarians, the chromatic is simply that which is marked against, and thus that which is opposed expressively to, the diatonic. When Jerrold Northrop Moore writes, in an interpretation of *The Black Knight*, that ‘The contrast of diatonic and chromatic was to be used throughout Edward’s creative life as a paradigm of good and evil, hope and doubt’, or, in his description of some of the music in Part II of *The Dream of Gerontius*, that ‘In the middle of this chromatic intensity the Angel of the Agony found a moment of diatonic comfort’, we know instinctively what he means, and we know that he is right. This is precisely the way that the music works. The same could be said, in many respects, of *Parsifal*.

But wait. Byron Adams, quoting some critical writing on *Gerontius* by W.J. Turner, warns us against ‘a reductive binary opposition between diatonic and chromatic that reflected the received opinion of many male British musicians and critics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’: that diatonicism is upright, healthy, Protestant, and masculine, whereas chromaticism is decadent, morbid, Catholic, and effeminate. Of Elgar’s working and composing in a culture in which such a gendering of diatonic and chromatic operated only slightly below the surface – and indeed operated in his own emotional make-up – there can be little doubt. So there was a problem with his composing when he did, and in England. Consider the wild emotional and creative contradiction that such gendering of musical styles must have set up for him. In order to gain something that he deeply desired in the core of his being – admission into the highest international circle of (male) composers, and public recognition of the value and originality of his art – he had to write music with the sort of chromaticism that could most compromise his own masculinity and the respect that he could hope to command in his own country.

This inner conflict plays itself out in absorbing ways over the course of his creative career. And one way in which it makes itself manifest is that, instead of reserving chromaticism for representation of evil, doubt, fear, and terror, he at times foregrounds it in some of his most upright, optimistic, masculine, proud music, thereby cutting directly against the grain of the reductive binary opposition noted by Adams. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Pomp and Circumstance* March no. 1, a work that has indubitably earned its stripes, at least in the culture in which he composed, as energetic, masculine, and patriotic (Ex. 1.1). Or consider his setting of ‘To give unto them that mourn a garland for ashes’ in the Prologue to *The Apostles* (Ex. 1.2). This music is nothing if not righteous, healthy, and

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2 Moore, *Elgar*, pp. 163 and 312.
uplifting. And so it is not just the simple diatonic/chromatic opposition that enables us to understand and interpret these passages; if it were, we would be compelled to link them with darkness, fear, and doubt. It is rather the diatonic/chromatic opposition coupled intimately with many other essential aspects of the music: mode, tempo, instrumentation, dynamics, melodic contour and character, harmonic underpinnings, and much more. Understanding the import of these critical features of the music helps us to realize that the chromatic lines and harmonic progressions in *Pomp and Circumstance* No. 1 make its swaggering pride even more pronounced, and that the chromatic undercurrent in the passage from *The Apostles* affords it a soothing quality that a purely diatonic version of the same music would not have.

Yet again, how did he do it? But this time, how did he do it, in a musical, technical, compositional way? It is here that another meta-narrative becomes relevant, one less well known, even at times arcane: that of the history of the theory of chromaticism in tonal music. The history of music theory: how can that help us to understand the music of Elgar? It can help us because, on the one hand, so much of the expressive force of his music is tied up with chromaticism, and on the other, because music theory has, since around the time that Elgar began his compositional career, developed a number of
effective tools for analysing chromatic music. Of course, a central task of
harmonic theory, going back however far in time one wants to go – back to
Riemann, back to Rameau, back to times when harmonic theory wasn’t even
called harmonic theory (Vicentino, or even further) – has been to deal with
chromaticism. To tell the history of the theory of chromaticism would entail
telling of the entire history of Western harmonic theory. But the various
theories of chromaticism, as they have developed in the past 125 years or so,
can illuminate Elgar’s music in ways that we can ill afford to ignore.

A quick overview of our situation clarifies the problem. The modern
project of chromatic theory properly begins in the United States, with two
works of the late 1970s: Robert Bailey’s essay ‘The Structure of the Ring and
of Nineteenth-Century Tonality’ in 1978.4 These two works, both fostered
by a desire to understand under-explicated aspects of chromaticism in
nineteenth-century music, opened the gates to a flood of studies, on topics
ranging from Schenker’s treatment of chromaticism, to neo-Lorenzian
formal and tonal analysis, to studies of music employing the octatonic
and hexatonic collections, to neo-Riemannian theory, transformational
theory, the notion of tonal pitch space, and in general to all sorts of analytical
and interpretive work on chromatic music from the late eighteenth to the
early twentieth century. As it turns out, though, most of this recent Anglo-
American chromatic theory is deeply indebted to the work of four German
theorists, working from roughly 1880 to 1935: Hugo Riemann (1849–1919),
Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935), Ernst Kurth (1886–1946), and Alfred
Lorenz (1868–1939).5 Virtually all the central ideas of the modern theories
appear, at least in nuce, in the work of these earlier German writers. The
net result of all this work, both older German and newer Anglo-American,
has been a deeper musical and hermeneutic understanding of the music of
a number of composers, with whose music the theoretical work has inter-
sected: Wagner, to be sure, but also Schubert, Liszt, Bruckner, Wolf, Mahler,

4 Robert Bailey, ‘The Structure of the Ring and
its Evolution’, DCM, 1 (1977), pp. 48–61;
Gregory Proctor, ‘Technical Bases of
Nineteenth-Century Chromatic Tonality’,
5 The literature by and about these four
theorists would fill volumes. For present
purposes, the primary sources are: Hugo
Riemann, Skizze einer neuen Methode der
Harmonielehre (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel,
1880) and Harmony Simplified [Vereinfachte
Harmonie, oder die Lehre von der tonalen
Funktionen der Akkorde, 1893], trans.
amonymous (London: Augener, 1896);
Heinrich Schenker, Harmony [Harmonielehre,
1906], trans. Elizabeth Borgese, ed. Oswald
Jonas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1954), The Masterwork in Music: A Yearbook
[Das Meisterwerk in der Musik: Ein Jahrbuch,
3 vols., 1925, 1926, 1930], ed. William Drabkin,
trans. Ian Bent et al., 3 vols. (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1994–7), and Free
Composition [Der freie Satz, 1935], ed. and
trans. Ernst Oster (New York: Longman, 1979);
Ernst Kurth, Romantische Harmonik und ihre
Krise in Wagners ‘Tristan’ (Bern: Haupt, 1920;
reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1975); and Alfred
Lorenz, Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard
Wagner, 4 vols. (1924–33; reprint Tutzting:
Schneider, 1966).
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Strauss, and Franck, to name a few. But one composer with whose music the work has not intersected is Elgar: the name Elgar is not so much as mentioned in any of my sources on the theory of chromaticism.

The task, then, is clear: to bring these rich resources into contact with a music whose tonal language shares remarkably much with that of the Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian Germanic lingua franca of the turn of the twentieth century. My strategy will be to distil available analytical approaches to chromaticism into six techniques, each employing the insights of a particular theorist or theorists. To illustrate each one, rather than citing the theorists’ examples from the canonical, mostly German repertoire, I will adduce examples from Elgar’s music, which employs precisely the same techniques. The first three techniques involve Elgar’s usage of chromaticism at the foreground and middleground levels – that is, from individual harmonies to passages of a few dozen bars. For each I will take a single, core idea from a relevant theoretical work or works, and show how it is central to Elgar’s expressive use of chromaticism. Technique 1 is simply the usage of the Tristan, or half-diminished seventh chord, which Ernst Kurth ably demonstrated to be crucial to Wagner’s musical language in Tristan, and which is ubiquitous in the music of Elgar. Technique 2 is the usage of line to render chromaticism comprehensible – especially the notion, promulgated famously by Schenker, but also to a degree by Kurth, that a unidirectional chromatic line in the melodic or bass voice can hold together a passage that is harmonically adventurous. Technique 3 involves the symmetrical division of the octave – especially with respect to exact, rather than diatonically adjusted sequences: a feature of chromatic music pointed out early on by Kurth, but also to a degree by Kurth, that a unidirectional chromatic line in the melodic or bass voice can hold together a passage that is harmonically adventurous. Technique 3 involves the symmetrical division of the octave – especially with respect to exact, rather than diatonically adjusted sequences: a feature of chromatic music pointed out early on by Kurth, but also to a degree by Kurth, that a unidirectional chromatic line in the melodic or bass voice can hold together a passage that is harmonically adventurous. Examples of these techniques will be drawn from a wide spectrum of Elgar’s music.

The idea that linear forces generate chromaticism is present in all of Schenker’s later work, beginning especially in 1925, with the publication of the first volume of The Masterwork in Music. For Kurth’s view on this topic, see Romantische Harmonik, p. 353.

Kurth, Romantische Harmonik, pp. 333–53.

Kurth, Romantische Harmonik, pp. 333–53.

The second set of three techniques deals with chromaticism at more global levels. Here I will draw examples exclusively from The Apostles, the largest compositional project of Elgar’s career. Technique 4 is Schenkerian analysis of large-scale dramatic and instrumental works—a level of analysis that goes far beyond the relatively local lines noted in Technique 2, to include whole operas, or entire multi-movement instrumental works. Inasmuch as a Schenkerian analysis of The Apostles would necessarily address many more aspects of the work than its chromatic tonal relations, I will only offer a few remarks about some of the published work in this area, and speculate on its possible relevance to the oratorio. Technique 5 is that of associative and cross-referential tonal relationships, posited first in Wagner’s music dramas by Kurth and Lorenz in the 1920s, and explicated much further by Robert Bailey, with his notion of ‘associative tonality’, and many other writers on opera and dramatic music in the past thirty years or so. I will also argue that it is a global concern for key relations—especially a concern for tonal association and cross-reference—that underlies the tonal coherence (but not coherence in the Schenkerian sense) of many large-scale instrumental works from Beethoven on. This is a concern that is only implicit, but yet of towering importance, in the analytical work of writers as different as Charles Rosen and Milton Babbitt, and it constitutes a hitherto unarticulated connection of Wagner and post-Wagnerian composers to the canonic symphonic tradition. Technique 6 involves the control of global tonal structure by means of various patternings of keys, often in a manner that interprets keys as players in a tonal narrative. Analytical work of this sort almost always combines associative keys with clear long-range tonal patterning; examples include Lorenz’s volumes on Wagner’s music dramas, Bailey’s work on the Ring, David Lewin’s and Fred Lerdahl’s on Parsifal, and Hepokoski’s on a scene from Verdi’s Falstaff and on Elgar’s First Symphony.

Three final observations are necessary before we begin to bring chromatic theory and Elgar’s music into creative contact. First, my references to

‘chromatic theory’ by no means suggest that there exists, either now or at any
time in the past, any single, monolithic theory of chromaticism in tonal
music. The analytical approaches represented by the six techniques noted
here developed rather haphazardly and independently of one another, over
a hundred years or more. Some of them, such as those of Schenker and
Rosen, were not conceived with the massive dramatic and instrumental
works of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in mind.
Others, such as Schenkerian and neo-Riemannian theory, at times make
incompatible claims about the music to which they are applied. And so forth:
‘chromatic theory’, as invoked here with respect to Elgar’s music, constitutes
less a unified theory than a useful arsenal of tools to approach chromatic
tonal music. Nevertheless, we can use the theories and analytical approaches
described here productively in concert with one another; I shall attempt to
do so myself, at the end of the first half of this essay, with respect to a critical
passage from the final movement of Elgar’s First Symphony, and in the
second half, with respect to The Apostles.

Second, chromatic theory continues to develop, in all sorts of ways, and in
all sorts of directions: it is arguably the most lively of music-theoretical pur-
suits early in the twenty-first century. Accordingly, I necessarily leave much
out of my account. I deal in only a peripheral way with neo-Riemannian
theory (as it relates to tonal symmetry, in Technique 3), and I do not directly
engage the work of Charles Smith, Daniel Harrison, or David Kopp – to name
just three theorists whose work is original, influential, and current.12 Nor do
I cover in any thorough way harmonic progression, for example, or enhar-
monicism, in Elgar’s music – topics clearly ripe for analysis and interpretation.
Here limits of time and space make it essential to be selective. Perhaps more
importantly, I have sought to use theoretical work that is as accessible as
possible, as opposed to work that would require extensive and detailed
exposition before I could make it relevant to Elgar’s music.

Third, and finally, I want to emphasize the fluid relationship between
analytical approach and compositional craft. Each analytical technique that
I posit is also, in a sense, a compositional technique: for example, a clear,
unidirectional melodic or bass line tying together a complex chromatic
passage is both a means of explanation (to point out the line is to offer a
theory of coherence) and a creative ploy (such lines, employed consciously or
unconsciously by the composer, make difficult chromatic passages more

12 Charles Smith, ‘The Functional Extravagance
of Chromatic Chords’, Music Theory Spectrum, 8 (1986), pp. 94–139; Daniel Harrison,
Harmonic Function in Chromatic Music
A Renewed Dualist Theory and an Account of Its
Precedents (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and ‘Nonconformist Notions of
Nineteenth-Century Enharmonicism’, Music Analysis, 21 (2002), pp. 115–60; and David
Kopp, Chromatic Transformations in
audible, and more palatable, for the listener). Discovering and describing such techniques sheds light on Elgar’s compositional craft, of course, but it also opens the door to interpretation and hermeneutics, for which the music ceaselessly cries out.

I Chromaticism at the surface, and slightly deeper

Of all the insights that our theorists have to offer regarding surface harmony in chromatic tonal music – chord quality, harmonic progression, local modulation – I shall choose but one: Ernst Kurth’s observation, in *Romantische Harmonik und ihre Krise in Wagners ‘Tristan’*, that the Tristan chord, the half-diminished seventh, is central to Wagner’s opera in particular, and to what Kurth called the ‘intensive alteration style’ in general.13 Alfred Lorenz tagged the same chord as a focal harmonic and symbolic entity, the *mystische Akkord*, in *Parsifal*, and it is a small leap to the music of Elgar, which is replete with occurrences of the chord.14 Kurth’s approach to the chord, and to all Romantic harmony, is dictated by his view that music is not merely an acoustical phenomenon, but a dynamic, psychological one, a play of unconscious, psychic energies that press forward in melodies and contrapuntal lines, and that sometimes coalesce into chords. For Kurth, the members of a chord are not inherently stable, but bristling with potential energy. In Romantic harmony, as he conceives it, even ostensibly stable major and minor triads are invested with linear-melodic tensions, and are thus not really stable at all. The site in the nineteenth-century repertoire at which this principle reaches its apogee is, not surprisingly, the Tristan chord, of which, at least in the form in which it first occurs in the Tristan Prelude, the individual members are each charged with a powerful urge for specifically melodic resolution. Kurth devotes over forty pages at the beginning of *Romantische Harmonik* to the Tristan chord, differentiating carefully between what he calls ‘energetic’ instantiations (in which the chord spelling contains contradictory urges for melodic resolution and thus cannot be analysed as a functional chord spelled in diatonic stacked thirds in some key) and ‘sensuous’ instantiations (in which the chord spelling is that of a diatonic seventh, and in which, therefore, the urges toward resolution in the

14Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form*, vol. IV, pp. 29–45. Lorenz laboriously tracks appearances of the chord throughout the music drama.
individual notes tend toward a single chord). The very first statement of the chord in Tristan is of course of the energetic type, while the occurrence at the climax in bb. 81–2 of the Prelude is of the sensuous type — although it changes, before our very ears, as it were, into an energetic type again at bb. 83. An inherent tension in Kurth’s understanding of the Tristan chord is in fact that, even though he considers its sensuous versions to be more stable than energetic versions, his idea that even triads are full of linear energy suggests that any half-diminished seventh is surging with potential energy. That energy is surely, according to Kurth, a primary source of the wistful, yearning quality and the symbolic power that accrue to the chord, whether sensuous or energetic, throughout Wagner’s music dramas.

Describing Wagner’s use of the chord in the Tristan Prelude, Kurth writes: ‘Its dominating position not only is implied by frequent occurrence, which discharges its basic permeating character over the entire symphonic music of the piece, but also it represents the decisive point in the Prelude’s architectural design.’ Frequency, permeation, rhetorical emphasis, occurrence at important nodes of musical design: these are precisely my reasons for choosing the half-diminished seventh, in and of itself, as the first crucial locus in bringing about an intersection of chromatic theory and Elgar’s chromatic writing. To be sure, he uses the chord hundreds of times in purely diatonic contexts, a few examples of which appear below. But it demands attention especially in chromatic usages — usages that resonate with Tristan, Götterdämmerung, and Parsifal, and that import into Elgar’s music a weighty history from those works. The two composers use the chord differently, of course. The energetic/sensuous distinction is considerably less relevant to Elgar’s music than to Wagner’s: ‘energetic’ examples occur frequently in Wagner, at least from Tristan on, but more rarely in Elgar. Elgar’s way of intensifying the chord was not so much to use non-diatonic versions of it, as Wagner did in the opening bars of Tristan, but to use a number of Tristan chords in succession — something that Wagner rarely did. Elgar’s usage may seem conservative in comparison to Wagner’s, but the chord permeates his work at least as much as it does his predecessor’s, and his skill at using it to maximum expressive effect shows that he learned his lesson well.

An early and characteristic example of Elgar’s use of half-diminished sevenths occurs in the opening of the first movement of the Organ Sonata (Ex. 1.3). Here there are three such chords: a ‘sensuous’ diatonic one built on F♯ (occurring twice, in two different inversions, bb. 6–7 and 8), and two

others (one sensuous, one energetic) involving chromatic notes – one on C♯ (b. 5), and one on A (spelt enharmonically as A–C–D–G, b. 6). Elgar achieves maximum melodic tension by placing the seventh in the top voice in three of four cases, always resolving it by step downward. Both diatonic half-diminished sevenths resolve to I6, instantiating his tendency to resolve vii7’s conventionally to the tonic in the major mode. (In the minor mode, where the half-diminished seventh is common as ii7, he frequently makes the resolution to some form of I, rather than to V – as in the theme of the Variations Op. 36, bb. 2, 3, 4, and 6.) Of the chromatic half-diminished sevenths in the Organ Sonata, the vii7/V (b. 5) resolves to V7/V before resolving to V, and the ‘energetic’ chord on the second beat of b. 6, surely the most poignant of them all, resolves to a diminished seventh, thereby rendering the half-diminished seventh more dissonant than its resolution. These chords, taken together, lend a particularly Elgarian cast to the passage – a quality rendered all the more touching when we feel Kurth’s Tristanesque energy flowing through them.  

Given the linear-harmonic tensions embodied in each Tristan chord, Elgar sometimes achieves a remarkable effect by lining them up in succession, without resolution. The simplest progression of this sort is exemplified by the third and fourth bars of the opening movement of the Second Symphony (Ex. 1.4 (a)). Here the vii3/V in Eb major progresses not to the expected I6, but to another half-diminished seventh, which soon leads to a brief tonicization of the subdominant. Crucial to the effect is the behaviour of the leading tone in the vii3, which slides down to D♭ rather than resolving up to Eb. This

17 See also Matthew Riley’s discussion of Elgar’s use of diatonic tritones, this volume, ch. 10.