

# **Nietzsche, Music, and Silent Suffering**

## **An Introduction**

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In my talk<sup>1</sup> this evening I will focus on the impact of Nietzsche's knowledge of music on his philosophy and the development of his thought. Along this path, I will also explore some key ideas of Nietzsche's that bear on music and hope to answer, at least to some extent, what music is for Nietzsche. Nietzsche is one of the few philosophers who was a musician and who could compose music, and this background in music had a significant influence on the way he thought and expressed his ideas; this topic is explored by Georges Liebert in *Nietzsche et le music* that came out in 1994 in France (also translated into English). Before I explore the music in Nietzsche's philosophy, I would like to drop a few notes on Nietzsche's musical development.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born in 1844 in Saxony, Germany (at the time a part of Prussia), a region rich in musical traditions; Leipzig is known as the home of many well-known composers (e.g. Schütz, Bach, Handel, Schumann, and Wagner). Nietzsche's father, a Lutheran minister at the small parish Röcken, used to play the piano when Nietzsche was little, and he died when Nietzsche was five. After his death, the family moved to Naumburg where Nietzsche went to school. Here Nietzsche's mother, Franziska Nietzsche acquired a piano, took lessons, and became Nietzsche's first piano teacher (first lessons in 1851). Mother and son would play duets in their back room.<sup>2</sup> After this Nietzsche also took private piano lessons, and in two years he could play Beethoven's sonatas and some transcriptions of Haydn's symphonies. In addition to these two composers, Mozart, Schubert, Mendelsohn, and Bach formed the framework of his early music education.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche also attended public and private concerts and performances in Naumburg in his early teen years.

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<sup>1</sup> This talk was presented at the Nietzsche and Music event on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012, at the New School University. At this event David Kilpatrick and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner presented papers on Nietzsche's relationship to music.

<sup>2</sup> Köhler, *Zarathustra's Secret*, translated by R. Taylor, New Haven: Yale University Press: 2002, p.15.

<sup>3</sup> Liébert, *Nietzsche and Music*, translated by D. Pellauer and G. Parkes, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p.13.

Around this time he also started composing music; the first attempts were made in his early teens. The earliest composition that survived is from 1857, *Allegro* for Piano, and most of his compositions are from his late teen years, to be precise from 1861 to 65. They were motivated by his musical demon and inspired by the cultural association called Germania that he had established with two of his friends in 1860. These compositions<sup>4</sup> bear the traces of Liszt (e.g in his symphonic poem *Ermanirich*), and Schumann (e.g. in his *Lieder*). During his high school years at Pforta (1858-64) and his university years at Bonn and Leipzig (from 1864 to 1868), Nietzsche attended concerts and sang, while composing music. His activities as composer declined when he started teaching at Basel University in 1869, although his *Manfred-Meditation*, a duet for piano, was finalized during his early Basel years. And by this time he must have lost his ambition to be a composer, although his musical daimon was still raging within him and, despite all odds, he did not entirely cease to compose. Nietzsche's music was not well received by the leading musicians of his time. Wagner politely reminded him of his poor compositions; Bülow gave a harsh critique to Nietzsche himself on his *Manfred-Meditation* (your music is "...more detestable than you think"), and Brahms never responded to Nietzsche's letter. Nor was the audience well disposed towards his music. "He played one of his compositions to an audience in Basel, which was received with displeasure, according to Julius Piccard." (Köhler, *Zarathustra's Secret*, p.121).

Regardless of his failure as a composer, music was such an essential part of young Nietzsche, or Nietzsche in every stage of his life, that without music there was no life for him: "When I don't hear any music, everything seems dead to me." (Liebert, p.16) Thus he confided in his mother in a letter written during his university years. And in this age without radios, record players and iPods, music meant live music. All of these notwithstanding, Nietzsche's formative years in music and his relationship to music and musicians would play a crucial role, in multiple layers, in the shaping of his later philosophy and his works in general.

## **Nietzsche-Wagner Encounter**

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<sup>4</sup> Many of Nietzsche's compositions are available in two CD productions. The second one was produced by the Nietzsche Music Project under the musical directorship of Tali Makell. NMP, a New York based non-profit organization, is dedicated to exploring Nietzsche's music and to spark interest in Nietzsche as a musical-philosopher.

Nietzsche's encounter with Wagner is not only a significant event in his musical life, but it is also one of the most intriguing encounters of the nineteenth century. The following is a list of the high points of this encounter. Nietzsche became familiar with Wagner's music in 1860 at the age of 16 when he came across Bülow's piano reduction of *Tristan*. Despite Nietzsche's later alienation from Wagner, *Tristan* remained a masterpiece for him (KSA 6, p.290). In November 1868 Nietzsche met Wagner in Leipzig when he was still a student at the university; lively conversation and common passion for Schopenhauer marked this first meeting. In 1869 Nietzsche attended two performances of Wagner's *Meistersinger*, one in Dresden conducted by Hans von Bülow, the other one in Karlsruhe conducted by Hermann Levi. From April 1869 to April 1872 Nietzsche visited Wagners 23 times (according to Hollinrake's *Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Philosophy of Pessimism*) at Tribschen, not far from Basel, Nietzsche's new home. In May 1872 Nietzsche was present at the foundation of Bayreuth, but he was not admitted as the writer and/or editor for its press. Nietzsche dedicated his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, to Wagner, which came out in 1872. In August 1876 Nietzsche attended Bayreuth festival and was repulsed by the whole atmosphere and ran away; shortly before this episode he had published his fourth *Untimely Meditation: Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, an intimately close and insightful analysis of the life and works of Wagner within the context of a grand artistic spectacle. In November 1876 Nietzsche and Wagner saw each other in Sorrento, Italy, for the last time. When Nietzsche sent a copy of his *Human, All Too Human* to Wagner, he declined to read it, out of friendship.

### **Nietzsche's Ideas on Music and Musicians**

Nietzsche's earliest, substantial ideas on music are to be found in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* and also his *Greek Music Drama*, which was not published in his life time. Many of these ideas are influenced by his readings of Schopenhauer in 1866, Wagner's aesthetic writings, and his knowledge of Greek drama. After introducing two key terms into aesthetics, the Apollinian and the Dionysian, Nietzsche moves on to understanding Greek tragedy in terms of these two art impulses. The Apollinian is the principle of individuation and is associated with image, dream, and pleasure, whereas the Dionysian is the state where there is no individuation and is associated with symbol, ecstasy, intoxication and suffering. As applied to arts, visual and plastic arts (and epic poetry) are Apollonian, and musical arts (and lyric poetry) are Dionysian;

since Greek theater is a synthesis of all arts like Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it is an agonistic union of both the Apollonian and the Dionysian forces. Since the Dionysian is primordial, music then is also primordial and is more universal than all other arts. Music is independent and does not need any formal or language-based medium. This is how Nietzsche expresses his ideas on music as he discusses lyric poetry within the context of Greek drama:

Our whole discussion insists that lyric poetry is dependent on the spirit of music just as music itself in its absolute sovereignty does not *need* the image and the concept, but merely *endures* them as accompaniments. The poems of the lyrist can express nothing that did not already lie hidden in that vast universality and absoluteness in the music that compelled him to figurative speech. Language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music, because music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the primal unity, and therefore symbolizes a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena. Rather, all phenomena, compared with it, are merely symbols: hence *language*, as the organ and symbol of phenomena, can never by any means disclose the innermost heart of music; language, in its attempt to imitate it, can only be in superficial contact with music; while all the eloquence of lyric poetry cannot bring the deepest significance of the latter one step nearer to us. (BT, chap.6, in BW, p.56)

In Greek drama, according to Nietzsche, the chorus was at the core of the stage and, with its musical functions, set the ecstatic mood of the whole theater as one unified being and brought all the diverse parts of the stage into a sensible whole. Many of these ecstatic functions, such as the satyr chorus, were borrowed from the cult of Dionysus, which Nietzsche considers to be the origin of Greek theater. In a way, Nietzsche projects the modern symphonic orchestra into the ancient chorus, as Liebert observes, whereas for Wagner the latter was only an incomplete pre-figuration of the former (Liebert, p.16).

Nietzsche's early ideas on music, predominantly Schopenhauerian, which means that they are based on Schopenhauer's metaphysics of will, a will that is mostly musical, are shortsighted and full of problems, which he himself would later recognize (in BT 1886 Preface). To say, as part of a cosmology, that all beings come into being, live, and then disappear, that is, all beings partake of the Apollinian and the Dionysian, and then to say that music is purely Dionysian and painting is purely Apollinian is inconsistent. In his post-Schopenhauerian and post-Wagnerian phase, Nietzsche saw the limitation of this dualism and the problems of Schopenhauerian metaphysics. One way of removing the difficulty, if we are still to use these two terms, is to say that music is more Dionysian than visual arts (but still has the Apollinian in it), whereas visual arts are more Apollinian than musical arts (but still have the Dionysian in them). In addition, once Nietzsche moves away from Schopenhauer and Wagner, he also gives up the idea of priority of music over other arts, as he declares in *The Case of Wagner*, one of his last books: no art should lord over other arts. This is not to say that music ceases to be important for Nietzsche; he was found to be improvising on the piano before he collapsed into insanity in January 1889.

Other than Wagner, other musicians are also subjects of discussion and criticism in Nietzsche's books. BGE Book 8 is one such place where Nietzsche reflects, within the context of the topic of this part, "Peoples and Fatherlands," on musicians and their style; a harsh verdict on German music is passed in Aphorism 245 where he diagnoses Schumann, his youthful passion, as a fall into fatherlandishness.

### **The Influence of Nietzsche's Musical Background on his Philosophy**

Nietzsche was a musician as much as he was a writer; it would be impossible to remove Nietzsche the musician from Nietzsche the writer. This is such an immense area of research that many more books will have to be written for a closer, a microscopic investigation. For the sake of simplicity, I will demarcate five areas in which one can trace the marks of Nietzsche's musicality in his written works:

- 1) Metaphors of music are scattered throughout Nietzsche's writings; they are borrowed from the language of music, mostly western music, and are used in many different ways in his

texts. Some have to do with hearing or listening or the tempo or the pause. A list of many examples would be impossible here, but I can give two or three examples. The first one is on reading and tempo. Writing on Germans who read badly, he says: “That one must not be in doubt about the rhythmically decisive syllables, that one experiences the break with any excessively severe symmetry as deliberate and attractive, that one lends a subtle and patient ear to every *staccato*<sup>5</sup> and every *rubato*<sup>6</sup>...” (BGE 246) Nietzsche does not stop with Germans and the lack of music in the literary culture; a few aphorisms further he criticizes the English with different metaphors of music: “But what is offensive even in the most humane Englishman is his lack of music, speaking metaphorically (but not only metaphorically): in the movements of his soul and body he has no rhythm and dance, indeed not even the desire for rhythm and dance, for “music.”” (BGE 252). Both of these criticisms apply to the whole modern culture and its lack of musicality. Another entirely different musical metaphor appears in *Twilight of the Idols*: “sounding out idols with a hammer.” (TI, Preface) The image of a musician who is a fighter like the troubadours of Occitan appears in this metaphor.

- 2) Nietzsche would rather have sung his works and not spoken, as he reveals in the 1886 Preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*. After a modest admission for the shortcomings of his youthful book fifteen years later, Nietzsche writes: “What spoke here—as was admitted, not without suspicion—was something like a mystical, almost maenadic soul that stammered with difficulty, a feat of the will, as in a strange tongue, almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself. It should have *sung*, this “new soul”—and not spoken!...” (BT, Preface, sec.3) This passage exposes an aspect of Nietzsche’s life as a creative spirit that exceeds just this one work; music and musical moods permeate all of Nietzsche’s works in different forms.

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<sup>5</sup> **Staccato** is a form of musical articulation, signifying an unconnected note, which is short and detached. It has been used in musical notation since the early 18th century. Staccato is derived from the Italian word *staccare* meaning to detach.

<sup>6</sup> **Tempo rubato** (Italian *stolen time*) is a musical term referring to the slight speeding up or slowing down of the tempo of a piece at the discretion of the soloist or the conductor. In the earlier type of rubato, the tempo of the melody was made more flexible, while the accompaniment kept strict time. A later type affected melody and accompaniment. While it is often associated with music of the Romantic Period, good classical performers frequently use rubato for emotional expressiveness in all kinds of works, while maintaining good taste in style.

- 3) Composition of his works: this includes word orders, sentence and paragraph structures, chapter and book organizations, and the use of punctuation. Nietzsche's use of punctuation is unique and may have been influenced by his knowledge of musical notation, an area that has yet to be unearthed.
- 4) Nietzsche's frequent use of prose/poetic genre to express his ideas; the best example for this genre is aphorism. Aphorisms enable the author to use poetic devices such as rhymes, play with words, variations on the same theme, repetition of sounds, metrical forms, anaphoras (repetition of the first word in successive lines), and epiphoras (or epistrophes, repetition of the last word in successive lines). These are analogous to musical devices, although music has a wider range of possibilities.
- 5) Finally, what he calls his greatest gift to humanity, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is a musical text. There are, at least, three speculations regarding the musicality of this text: a) the work is modeled loosely on Greek tragic tetralogy (three thematically related dramas followed by a satyr play). As it is known, Greek drama was a music drama. Therefore, if this speculation is correct, Nietzsche had music in mind (not Greek music but nineteenth century symphonic music) that accompanied the written text. Since he himself did not (or could not) write the musical part, it is up to the future generations of musicians to do the work; Richard Strauss composed for about 10 sections out of about 80 in total (plus the Prologue). b) *Zarathustra* is a music drama influenced by Wagner. This position is defended by Hollinrake in his *Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Philosophy of Pessimism*, where he does a micro comparative analysis between passages from *Zarathustra* and parts of Wagner's operas. Undoubtedly there are many differences too; in *Zarathustra* one does not come across Germanic gods and heroes and medieval heroes like Parsifal. However, Hollinrake explores the connection at deeper symbolic levels and through the common Schopenhauerian territory. c) music is not only in the structure and the form, but in the very text itself. In his recent translation of *Zarathustra* into English, Graham Parkes aims to bring out the musicality of this text, as he says in his Note to the Text and Translation: "In view of Nietzsche's saying that *Zarathustra* is to be taken as music, I have tried above all to convey the musicality of the text... This has meant faithfully reproducing its paragraph structure and—in most cases—its punctuation, as

well as all repetition of words, phrases, and sentences...I have attempted to retain as far as possible the alliterations and assonances, and above all the rhythms and cadences<sup>7</sup> of the original..." (TSZ, p.xxxv).

### **What is Music for Nietzsche?**

What may have music meant to Nietzsche? Why was music so central to his life? This is another complex topic in the life and works of Nietzsche. I will tentatively propose several ideas some of which may be applicable only to one phase of Nietzsche's life.

The first one is the idea of re-covery from (or sublimation) of pain and suffering. Suffering and what we do with suffering is one of the fundamental aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophy and also of many religions. A tendency to deal with his own suffering at a young age and music's power of redemption may have been interlinked in young Nietzsche, as he reflected on the loss of his father who also reminded him of this invisible power. This is how he recorded it in his notes in 1858, nine years after the fact: "At one o'clock in the afternoon, the [funeral] ceremony began with a full ringing of bells. Oh, their hollow sounding knell will never leave my ears, never will I forget the somber melody of the chorale *Jesu meine Zuversicht* [Jesus, my refuge]! The organ resonated throughout the church." (Liébert, *Nietzsche and Music*, p.18). Suffering and how we relate to suffering remains a central theme throughout Nietzsche's works, and the connection between suffering and music via the Dionysian is clearly established in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In a similar way he would call Wagner "the Orpheus of silent suffering."

Second, music is an emotional experience. Music not only invokes feelings, but is a way of mastering feelings, as Nietzsche writes in a letter to Bülow: "...Of my music I know only one thing: that it enables me to master feelings." Schopenhauer discusses in his *World as Will and*

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<sup>7</sup> In Western musical theory, a **harmonic cadence** (Latin *cadentia*, "a falling") is a progression of (at least) two chords that concludes a phrase, section, or piece of music. A **rhythmic cadence** is a characteristic rhythmic pattern indicating the end of a phrase. Cadences give phrases a distinctive ending, which can, for example, indicate to the listener whether the piece is to be continued or concluded. An analogy may be made with punctuation, with some weaker cadences acting as commas, indicating a pause or momentary rest, while a stronger cadence will then act as the period, indicating the end of the phrase or musical sentence. A cadence is labeled more or less "weak" or "strong" depending on the sense of finality it creates. While cadences are usually classified by specific chord or melodic progressions, the use of such progressions does not necessarily constitute a cadence—there must be a sense of closure, as at the end of a phrase. Harmonic rhythm plays an important part in determining where a cadence occurs.

*Representation* the wide range of feelings that music can invoke; Nietzsche accepts this and shows how limited language is when it comes to expressing human emotions. This is another topic of importance in Nietzsche's works, the types of feelings, what they are, where they originate in the human soul, their quality, high feelings, low feelings, how certain feelings can be overcome; in sum, the mastery of feelings. Nietzsche gives a special role to music in this regard.

Third, music is an aesthetic experience of the sublime, "das Erhabene" in German. Sublime, according to Kant, has to do with that which cannot be presented by Imagination, it has to do with the formless, the infinite, the intangible, and the grand. Although music cannot be said to be formless, through its cosmic symbolism music can throw the listener into elevated states. The fourteen-year-old Nietzsche was cognizant of this aspect of music: "Music combines all qualities; it can exalt us, divert us, cheer us up, or break the hardest heart with the softness of its melancholy tones. But its principal purpose is to direct our thoughts toward higher things, to elevate and even to shake us..." (Liébert, *Nietzsche and Music*, p.18). Although Nietzsche gave up the idea of Christian sublimation of his early life, he never gave up the idea of being directed or elevated toward higher beings or states; this strife and these higher states are to be later expressed by Nietzsche as the overhuman.

Fourth, music is an ecstatic experience. Nietzsche has amply shown the connection between music (arts in general) and ecstatic states and moods in his early works; and in his late writings he does not give up the idea of the Dionysian or his belief in the necessity of Dionysian forces in the life of a culture. The Dionysian now means affirmation of life forces, orgiastic states, overcoming pessimistic resignation in the face of suffering, "an urge to unity, a reaching out beyond personality, the everyday..., an ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life...the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction..." (WP 1050) Although Nietzsche rarely brings up music in these passages because music is no longer privileged over other arts, the spirit of music is present in all the things he says about Dionysus and the Dionysian. On a different note, one of the intense Dionysian experiences for Nietzsche was to play music with someone else; this is how Louis Kelterborn, a former student who visited Nietzsche in 1875 at a spa in southern Black Forest, recounted the story: "As we played together, Nietzsche was the image of kindness, patience and

at the same time passion and encouragement. We played the Prelude to *Tristan* several times in succession, then the “Ode to Joy” and above all the great *Manfred* music, the passionate intensity of which he conveyed by extraordinarily playing, carrying me on the swell of his profound emotional response to this music.” (Köhler, *Zarathustra’s Secret*, p.118).

Fifth, music is a source of inspiration, as its Greek root indicates. To be activated or enervated, Greeks needed their muses who guided them to sublime action. And music existed almost in all walks of life in ancient Greece: in contest games as in Olympia, at gymnasia, at symposia, at cult practices, in the theater, and so on.

Sixth, music can be a collapse into pessimism, as in the case of Wagner and other musicians (this may be due to the problem of having “seen” too much), or a recovery from the pessimistic world-view. Nietzsche had gone through both phases. In his youthful phase perhaps due to his own sufferings and search, a Schopenhauerian pessimism had a certain appeal to him, a pessimism that evades life in the face of suffering and withdraws into a musical solitude—Schopenhauer used to play the flute for himself. However, he could see through the problems of this type of pessimism and its music-suffering-Dionysian association. The first sign of his break-away can be discerned in *Human, All Too Human*: “Music is, of and in itself, not so significant for our inner world...In itself, no music is profound or significant, it does not speak of the ‘will’ or of the ‘thing in itself’; the intellect could suppose such as a thing...” (Aphorism 215) The association of music with pessimism is only interpretive and is not inherent to music; Nietzsche has seen both sides of Janus’ face and has come full circle in terms of the spectrum of musical moods and sentiments.

Seven, music is the most primordial and the most primary expression of a total artwork and a total human being. Nietzsche subscribed to this Wagnerian idea in his early phase; it is also inspired by their interpretation of Greek drama. They both saw a unifying function in music; it is through music that all arts that are disparate come together. And Nietzsche saw Wagner as a total artist in accordance with Wagner’s own theory of total artwork; not only all arts but all forces of culture come together in the life of Wagner: “I recognize in Wagner such a counter-Alexander: he unites what was separate, feeble and inactive; if a medicinal expression is permitted, he

possesses a stringent power: to this extent he is one of the truly great cultural masters. He is master of the arts, the religions, the histories of the various nations..." (UM IV: RWB, p.209)

Finally, music is a joyful intuition and a moment of self-discovery. In a letter to Rohde, his friend from university years, he writes: "At last we could let ourselves be carried away by the emotional power of this music, this Schopenhauerian world every corner of which I can see and feel, so that listening to Wagner's music becomes a joyful intuition, a moment of self-discovery." (Köhler, p.95). Being intuitive, to discover one's self, these have been at the core of Nietzsche's philosophical life; all his philosophy can be summed up as a journey of such self-discovery. In this letter to Rohde he reveals music's power for helping see oneself and re-invent oneself through re-discovery. Nietzsche "endured" his own music in silence throughout his philosophical life.

### **Epilogue on Music, Dionysian, and Madness**

Nietzsche collapsed into madness in early 1889 in Turin; a madness that is unique and that has been widely interpreted. Medicinal explanations aside, for which there is ample material from a long history of many ailments, Nietzsche's life was a perpetual struggle with himself, within himself, and with his own daemons. Nietzsche's daemon was of musical, poetic, and philosophical nature, which means, Nietzsche was composing, writing, and thinking in his inner life all the time. Musical works, poetry and thoughts all wanted to flow out of his soul in an ecstatic burst. To be artworks they also had to be mastered, a form given to the raw Dionysian forces. He was sufficiently equipped as a writer and a thinker to achieve this, but not in music. Nonetheless, it was music that wrapped up his whole life, which was the common element to his poetic and philosophical madness, the madness of a Dionysian thinker. After his collapse he was asked about his state at the hospital in Basel to which he responded that he felt well, but that he could express his state only in music. And later in the train to Jena, waking up from his chloral induced sleep, he would sing the gondolier's song from Wagner's *Tristan*. In madness all Nietzsche could remember was the musical collections of his life. A madness that can ultimately be called musical.