

Nietzsche's and 20th century Music

In order to understand Nietzsche's relationship to twentieth-century music, one must first examine Nietzsche's peculiar relationship to western (European) music. Only the author of such divergent books as *The Case of Wagner* and *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* could be credited with influencing Schoenberg and Strauss, Stravinsky and Mahler. The inherent contradiction of Nietzsche's philosophical works meant that the power of his writings could be simultaneously applied by proponents and opponents of any number of aesthetic issues. When Nietzsche's fascination with music is taken into consideration, it seems almost unavoidable that his work would influence a wide array of musical trends—several of which that explicitly contradict each other.

Due to Nietzsche's original and unique approach to philosophy, his ideas did not reach the musical world by the same trajectory as other thinkers. Whereas Schiller's aesthetic principles were routinely discussed in Beethoven's circles and Wagner actively championed Schopenhauer's views of the singular nature of music, Nietzsche's avoidance of easily communicated concepts in his works lent a mysterious, ecstatic air to his thought. Although many musicians read *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and were inspired and motivated, few truly grasped the underlying philosophical substance of his writings.¹ As the Nazi misappropriation of Nietzsche's thought illustrates, the emotional and inspirational powers of his works were appreciated long before the critical and philosophical aspects were understood. One substantive component, however, *was* immediately understood and largely accepted by Nietzsche's contemporaries—his description and criticism of modernism. In fact, it is Nietzsche's role as mouthpiece (and critic) of modernism that brought his works to the attention of twentieth-century composers and critics. The resulting variety of musical works that trace an influence back to Nietzsche can be explained largely by determining with which component of Nietzsche's work the composer or critic identified: the ecstatic qualities of his literature, or the metaphysical and nihilistic issues characteristic of his philosophy.

It is important to explain my choice of categories before discussing the specific works that belong in one category or the other. Many of the best-known “Nietzschean” works borrow texts or titles from Nietzsche’s works but are not demonstrations of the composer’s engagement with Nietzsche’s philosophy per se. Similarly, there are many musical works that illustrate the composer’s interest in Nietzsche’s aesthetic without explicitly detailing that connection. In fact, this mutual exclusivity of explicit Nietzschean references and application of Nietzschean aesthetic principles appears to be the rule rather than the exception. I do not intend to investigate the reasons behind this paradox in this brief article, but it is a topic rich in research possibilities. To venture one hypothesis, I would suggest that Nietzsche’s explicit rejection of disciples and followers might dissuade a learned Nietzsche scholar from repeating or borrowing from another’s text. Regardless of motivation, this distinction appears valid and I will organize the following discussion accordingly.

Many of the best-known Nietzsche-inspired musical works can be categorized as literary based works. Richard Strauss’ *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Gustav Mahler’s Third Symphony and Delius’ *Mass to Life* all belong in this group. Compositions in this group find their inspiration in Nietzsche’s poetry and his unique literary style without directly engaging with his philosophical program.² Of all of these, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* is probably the most closely associated with Nietzsche and, ironically, one of the least Nietzschean in a fundamental sense. Richard Strauss composed this orchestral work in 1896 (stretching my appellation of “Twentieth-Century Music” by four years) based loosely on Nietzsche’s work of the same name. In Strauss’ own words from the program notes at the work’s premiere:

I did not intend to write philosophical music or to portray in music Nietzsche's great work. I wished to convey by means of music an idea of the development of the human race from its origin, through the various phases of its development, religious and scientific, up to Nietzsche's idea of the superman. The whole symphonic poem is intended as an homage to Nietzsche's genius, which found its greatest expression in his book *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

That Strauss was moved by Nietzsche's book is not in doubt, but to attribute a deep understanding of the text to the composer is a questionable proposition. Although Strauss entered Munich University as a philosophy student, he dropped out after a year to pursue his musical studies in Berlin, and shortly thereafter began studying with the noted conductor, Hans von Bülow (the ex-husband of Wagner's wife and harsh critic of Nietzsche's own music). Throughout Strauss' early career he avoided combining philosophical and musical ideas in contrast to the intellectualized musical atmosphere of turn-of-the-century Europe. A hint of his anti-intellectualism can be found in the opening line of the preceding quotation. Despite his personal avoidance of combining philosophy and music, he actively read the works of others, including Wagner's many writings on aesthetics and "the music of the future."

Throughout the 1880's Strauss became a more and more unabashed Wagnerian, partly through the influence of his best friend, Alexander Ritter—the husband of Wagner's niece. Using his connections as an esteemed conductor, Strauss worked to support the music of Wagner and Liszt, and the two composer's influences are readily heard in Strauss' compositions. The irony of an enthusiastic Wagnerian basing a tone poem on a text by the author of *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* goes a long way to support the description of Strauss as little more than an amateur Nietzschean at best. He chose to introduce the work with a short synopsis of Zarathustra's "plot-line," but made no pretensions to shed light on the works deeper meanings. In fact, Strauss' use of Nietzsche's text can be seen as an act of musical conservatism akin to Wagner and Schubert's use of Heine texts,³ or Liszt's *Après une Lecture de Dante*, in which the composers were drawn to the *dramatic* nature of the texts, seeing music as a means of intensifying the text's expressive power. Simply put, the philosophical implications of Nietzsche's work that we have today were not widely understood when Strauss composed this "Nietzschean" work, and it would be more accurate to place the tone poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra* within the genre of romantic musical-literary works than as a harbinger of modernism, whatever that may be. The music itself is brilliantly written, but in the style of a previous epoch—a style that Nietzsche himself might have described as decadent.

It should be noted, however, that later in Strauss' career he did experiment with the idea of a "philosophical music," especially after he began his long-term collaboration with poet-philosopher Hugo von Hofmannsthal. This period began in 1909 (fifteen years after *Also Sprach Zarathustra*) and included the operas *Elektra* and *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and the tone poem, *An Alpine Symphony*, all of which show Nietzsche's influence at a more profound level. The ancient Greek subject matter of the operas alone implies Hofmannsthal and Strauss' familiarity with *Birth of Tragedy* and its embrace of the Dionysian. Hofmannsthal writes that *Elektra* is about the, "dissolution of the concept of individuality. In *Elektra* the individual is dissolved in the empirical way, inasmuch as the very substance of its life blasts it from within, as water about to freeze will crack an earthenware jug. Electra is no longer Electra..."⁴ The dissolution of the individual presented in Strauss' opera is precisely the horrifying, chaotic, Dionysian experience that Nietzsche points to in the *Birth of Tragedy*. Furthermore, both of these later operas demonstrate the light touch and the "excess of life which has here become creative."⁵ It may be illustrative to compare excerpts from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and *Elektra* to demonstrate the difference between romanticism and Dionysianism. In Act III of *Tristan*, Tristan is waiting for Isolde to return when he hears a shepherd's song. The tune causes Tristan to wax nostalgic for his childhood, simultaneously remembering the grief that filled his early years. His re-feeling of youthful grief triggers a bout of self-pity in which he curses both his childhood and the love potion that led to his current situation. The music is beautiful but tragic, filled with Wagner's characteristic avoidance of resolution. Tristan responds to his weakened state by retreating within and indulging in the narcotic effects of *ressentiment*.⁶ In one word, the scene is romantic. It celebrates life's poverty and touches on the trifecta of romanticism: unrequited love, longing for death and martyrdom.

Now consider an example from Richard Strauss' *Elektra*—specifically Orestes' murder of Aegisthus. Although the death of Aegisthus completes the mission undertaken by Elektra and her brother, Orestes, to avenge the murder of their father, Strauss treats it lightly, even comically. The musicologist Daniel Albright describes it as sounding, "rather like the assassination of Till

Eulenspiegel,"⁷ the famously comical figure of Strauss' like-titled tone poem. It might be objected that embarking on a program of revenge is itself an example of *ressentiment*, but Strauss' treatment of the action repositions it as a positive, life-affirming action. Strauss' dark humor emphasizes Elektra and Orestes' reacquisition of their title and position through their active seizure of opportunity, as opposed to the tentative passivity of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra (Agamemnon's wife and Elektra's step-mother). The opera brings further focus to Elektra and Orestes' Nietzschean qualities by comparing them to their sister Chrysothemis. Although she mourns her father's death as vocally as any in the family, the difficulty inherent in righting the wrong frightens her into retreat. Her longings for the peace of anonymous domesticity are strikingly anti-Nietzschean—Strauss creates an operatic straw man against which the *übermensch* Elektra's strength and action can be more effectively contrasted.

Arnold Schoenberg's writings and compositions provide the implicit, analytical antipode to Strauss' explicit, literary-motivated Nietzschephelia. Schoenberg composed during the first half of the twentieth-century, and despite working roughly contemporaneously with Strauss, maintained radically different conceptions of what music should be. Whereas Strauss essentially extended late romanticism—musically speaking a late nineteenth-century phenomenon—well into the twentieth century, Schoenberg actively severed connections with the romantic era. Schoenberg, along with two of his pupils, Anton Webern and Alban Berg, began to be known as the Second Viennese School—a school of thought that challenged the limits of the tonal system, and eventually broke with it entirely. Schoenberg's works varied widely throughout his career: his earliest works remained within the tonal system but experimented with extreme dissonance, the compositions from the middle of his career are frequently termed "expressionist," and his later works completely depart from tonality and adopt the twelve-tone system that Schoenberg pioneered. Behind this great variety of style, however, is a remarkable unity of personality and purpose, and it is in the realm of general sensibility that Schoenberg can best be described as Nietzschean.

Although Schoenberg received bits and pieces of musical education, he was essentially an autodidact and exhibited remarkable self-confidence throughout his career. Turn-of-the-century Austria had a highly stratified musical scene that favored musicians with hereditary and educational pedigrees. Schoenberg, meanwhile, was a vociferous opponent to traditional music education insofar as it failed to connect with music's expressive purpose. For him, music must be an intensely personal activity, as opposed to the codified restrictions he felt others imposed upon their students and their compositions. While other pedagogues would prescribe counterpoint exercises on 17th century *cantus firmi*, Schoenberg incessantly called for authenticity, integrity, and honesty. It is not surprising then, that both Schoenberg and his students produced such a varied musical output; they were bound only by their own convictions rather than a set of compositional devices or styles. And to create works such as *Verklärte Nacht*, the song-cycle *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten*, and his *Klavierstücke*, Op. 23, a remarkable amount of conviction was required. His Hanging Garden songs provide just one such example. In these works Schoenberg confronted the limits of the tonal system and embraced the vertiginous world that lay beyond. Ever since Wagner, composers had pushed tonality further and further through increasing amounts of dissonance, but no one dared attempt its actual destruction. In the songs from *Das Buch*, Schoenberg takes the monumental step of *not* resolving the dissonances *at all*. Wagner's music thirty years previously had demonstrated the effects that could be created by *delaying* the resolution of dissonances, and other composers, including Richard Strauss, further developed the technique. But Schoenberg transgressed the eight hundred year old tonal system by destroying the harmonic expectations it naturally creates.

It does not require too much imagination to compare Schoenberg's erasure of harmonic expectations to Nietzsche's Madman, who asks, "Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?"⁸ Likewise, parallels between Schoenberg's descent into atonalism and the Dionysian experience of looking within the abyss are striking. While Strauss quoted Nietzsche, yet remained ensconced in the musical

bourgeoisie, Schoenberg remained mute on the subject but actively transgressed society's hypocritical barriers. Much as Nietzsche scolds Europe for killing God, and subsequently acting in His name, Schoenberg's music acts as a stern rebuke to a European musical tradition that proclaims the end of tonality, but cannot find the courage to embrace the resulting state of affairs. Carl Dahlhaus, the esteemed musicologist, has pointed out Schoenberg's single-minded persistence for what he believed was the unavoidable evolution of music, describing him as a sort of musical prophet who descends to the musical world to proclaim a message nobody wants to hear. Although Dahlhaus makes no explicit comparisons to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, the analogy is unavoidable. Perhaps the most explicit comparison between Schoenberg and Nietzsche's *übermensch* (and even Nietzsche himself!) can be found in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. The main character, Leverkühn, is famously based on Nietzsche, and in the course of the book attains some fame for inventing twelve-tone music. Although it is hazardous to give anyone in the "real" world exclusive authorship of a concept as long in the making as twelve-tone composition, Arnold Schoenberg is widely agreed to be its most significant developer. Mann (and Theodore Adorno, with whom Mann consulted while writing the novel) obviously saw similarities in style, beliefs and experiences between Nietzsche and Schoenberg.

To contrast Richard Strauss and Arnold Schoenberg is to compare radically different modes of Nietzschean influence. Is it accurate to characterize the works of both composers as Nietzschean? Should neither be characterized thusly? It is my opinion (and perhaps I have betrayed my prejudices in the preceding paragraphs) that Schoenberg's musical heroics sync most closely with Nietzsche's philosophy, but it is important not to confuse similarity with influence. Strauss undeniably read Nietzsche's works, felt them to be important and, later in his life, implemented elements of them into his works. Schoenberg, on the other hand, acknowledged very few influences, preferring to see himself as a forward-thinking composer within an ever-evolving musical spectrum. It can be assumed that Schoenberg was familiar with Nietzsche's works, as any well-read Austrian of the first half of the twentieth-century would be. His close associate, Webern, set some of Nietzsche's texts in his songs, and comparisons

such as Mann's were not unusual amongst critics. It is striking, however, that despite the cultural overlap between these two men Schoenberg never explicitly acknowledges any Nietzschean influence. It could be argued that Schoenberg began his übermenschian trajectory long before reading or hearing excerpts of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, and for that reason any dependent relationship between the two men is impossible. In fact, it seems improbable that an endeavor as large and significant as Schoenberg's could be motivated by a text encountered well into his adult life. If, then, Nietzsche did not directly influence Schoenberg, should his music and his actions *not* be interpreted within a Nietzschean context?

I would argue that the unique form in which Nietzsche delivers his philosophy allows for, and actually benefits from, such a non-linear relationship. Nietzsche's works are notoriously un-philosophical; he does not develop a Cartesian system, nor does he engage in Hegelian logic. The best-known Nietzschean principles—the *Übermensch*, the will to power, and the eternal recurrence—are presented by way of examples, not explanation. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins point out that the *übermensch*, "is presented in more imagistic than explanatory terms."⁹ *Beyond Good and Evil* is a collection of aphorisms and *Also Sprach Zarathustra* is a fable. Nietzsche works to accrete a critical mass of contexts and examples that indicate *possible outcomes* that an individual might witness after engaging with Nietzsche's thought. It is left to the individual to work backwards and discern the proper path to those goals. As Walter Sokel has pointed out in an excellent essay on this website, Nietzsche constantly embraces the paradox of unity and individuality throughout his texts. The resulting affirmation of both all-embracing unity (epitomized by the concept of the eternal recurrence) and stark singularities (the *Übermensch*) breaks down logic and replaces it with a constantly moving target. If different epochs in philosophical history can be understood as pendulum swings from one extreme to the other, than perhaps Nietzsche's thought is best described as an embrace of the pendulum's constant motion. Its paradoxical quality necessitates an alternative method of communication; one of Nietzsche's favorites is to lead by example.

As Strauss' earlier works illustrate, musicians did not readily grasp the deeper implications of Nietzsche's thought when it was first published. To Strauss it was *Also Sprach Zarathustra's* drama that drew him to the work. Twenty years and one world war later, the apocalyptic qualities of Nietzsche's work could come into sharper focus, and the societal critique for which Nietzsche called became more apparent. A close scrutiny of the life and works of Arnold Schoenberg reveal him to be a "man of his age" who threw off the weight of previous centuries and sought out "new ways." Although Schoenberg must have come across Nietzsche's books, he did not explicitly acknowledge their influence, yet his life provides a parable wonderfully in keeping with Nietzsche's philosophy. The question then becomes: "Did Schoenberg react to the slow-burning Nietzschean influences existing in Vienna?" If this is a viable alternative to the traditional teacher-student dichotomy typified by Schopenhauer and Wagner, then it would lack documentation and verifiability. But a linear, cause and effect relationship would not be expected anyway, given Nietzsche's preferred form of discourse. A truly Nietzschean "seeker after truth" learns from accumulating a diversity of perspectives and reconstituting a new way appropriate for himself. The unusual result of this type of non-linear interpretation is that Nietzsche's relationship with twentieth-century music is inextricably linked with the constant activity of interpreting Nietzsche's thought. His influence on twentieth-century music, therefore, occurred through the surrogate of his own philosophical methods, albeit at a distance from their author. The ways and means of philosophizing laid out in *Genealogy of Morals* and *Also Sprach Zarathustra* were implemented by Schoenberg as he wiped away the tonal horizon and faced the resulting void with optimism and determination.

¹ It can be argued Nietzsche's works were not fully appreciated until Heidegger or possibly even Walter Kaufmann engaged with his thought.

² To attribute a thorough-going philosophical system to Nietzsche is controversial to say the least, in this instance I use the term with minimal systemization in mind.

³ Wagner used Heine's texts as a basis for *Der fliegende Holländer* and Schubert used Heine texts for several of his lieder.

⁴ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Selected Plays and Libretti*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 88.

⁵ *Gay Science*, s370.

⁶ A French term meaning, literally, “to feel again.” Nietzsche describes it as a perverse joy in reliving miserable experiences, comparable to picking at a scab.

⁷ Albright, Daniel. *Modernism and Music*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p112.

⁸ *The Gay Science*, s125.

⁹ Magnus, Bernd and Kathleen Higgins. *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1996), p40.