

Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche: On the quarrel between music and philosophy?¹

I have been asked to speak about Friedrich Nietzsche, the notorious philosopher of the 19th century. A request to hear about Nietzsche from the Wagner society is no surprise: Wagner and Nietzsche formed arguably the most complex and fateful relationship a musician and thinker have ever formed. From their earliest meeting in Leipzig in 1868 until the last “notes of insanity” (Wahnsinnszettel) by the “crucified” Friedrich Nietzsche twenty years later, the phenomenon of Wagner exudes a magnetic, at times overwhelming force responsible for explosive consequences upon Nietzsche’s thinking, provoking enthusiasm, passionate love and vitriolic rejection. Wagner divides Nietzsche’s thinking as he divides listeners.

I believe that Nietzsche, the thinker was able to articulate how and why this may have been and perhaps must be the case. In this achievement Nietzsche overcomes personal views and preferences and achieves greatness in the way a philosopher must- as diagnostician of the personal and collective consciousness and as a historian of the spirit. Nietzsche alerts us to Wagner as a phenomenon. He shows how profound creativity, imagination and reflection transcend particular and personal existence and connect us with an ultimately fundamental realm.

Initially and for those who have read some of Nietzsche’s writings on Wagner, my affirmation of this transcendence of personal views and particular circumstances must sound strange. Are some of Nietzsche’s writings not full of personal invective, of insult and impertinence in reference to Wagner and his music? What should one make of comments such as these: “Is Wagner even human? Is he not rather a disease? He makes everything sick that he approaches- he has made music sick”² or “Wagner has an effect like the ongoing consumption of alcohol. He dulls our perception, he fills the stomach with phlegm. Particular effect: degeneration of rhythmic feeling”³. How can I claim that in fact such views transcend the personal? These are words by Friedrich Nietzsche. Are such comments worthy of a philosopher?

In the second post-script to the work that contains the above comments, Nietzsche states: “I have written the most profound books for the Germans that they have - reason enough, that they do not understand them at all... Other musicians are not worthy of consideration in comparison to Wagner.”⁴ This establishes a peculiar contradiction to these earlier comments and suggests a perplexing ambivalence in Nietzsche’s views on Wagner. Was Nietzsche undecided about Wagner? Was he pursuing rhetorical effect?

We will not be able to answer these questions until we can attempt a fuller view of what Nietzsche actually has to say in total in the case of Wagner and how his thinking about music and Wagner develops. In the case of philosophy the isolation of selected comments says nothing. The truth of a philosopher’s statement resides in his thinking, which always contains a development, a path. Picking out statements reduces the thinker to a peddler of opinions. To be sure, contemporary life with its babbling media may be unable to appreciate this point. In our obsession for the market we seem to demand that short comments and catchy clichés must and do say everything.

I suggest this as a warning: Nietzsche and Wagner may lead us beyond historical interest, beyond operatic curiosity, beyond cultural tourism and beyond weekend magazines into a fundamental realm where disagreement and dissonance are not only evident but may become necessary and required. We must appreciate the philosophical point that without dissonance harmony itself remains inconceivable. Nietzsche and Wagner present us first and foremost with a challenge to conceive harmony and dissonance on a very fundamental level and within a realm of abstractness that can be perplexing. Both may lead us into a realm of uncertain answers and of unanswerable questions, into a realm of need and necessity, into a realm that invites us to listen.

The topic of Wagner and Nietzsche has excited intellectuals and musicians for some time. In the first instance, Nietzsche’s famous writings, not at all dryly academic but filled with intellectual passion and

¹ An earlier, shorter version of his paper was given at the Sydney Northside Opera Group (February 2008) and the Wagner Society, Goethe Institute, Sydney (October 19, 2008)

² FW, 912

³ FW, 931

⁴ FW, 933

fire, ensure that this topic remains alive. I would contend that if we wish to understand Nietzsche or Wagner we need to attempt an understanding of their ambiguous relationship in those dimensions where either attempted to transcend the immediately personal.

For Nietzsche, Wagner was an opportunity and a question mark that provoked and challenged him fundamentally. He provided the inspiration for his “artist’s metaphysics” and serves as the model for the magician derided in the “Zarathustra”- a symbol of decadence and intoxication by appearance. Less so, but nevertheless, Nietzsche was also important to Wagner. For Wagner, Nietzsche was an opportunity to achieve intellectual legitimacy in his desire to be understood, to be appreciated, and recognised on a higher level – an intellectual, a professor even able to validate the claim with authority that it was possible to be more than a musician, that music, drama and opera could be realms where appearance achieved transcendence towards truth. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was a chance for Wagner to connect credibly with a level of metaphysical importance dictated not only by the composer’s own narcissism but ultimately by a belief in the seriousness and profundity of his musical and dramatic artistry.

Wagner was never satisfied to be merely a musician. His artistry was fuelled by the romantic notion of the identity between theology and music. This aspiration has historical roots in German romanticism. In its reaction to the rationalism of enlightenment, romanticism emphasised the importance of feeling and intuition for cognition and argued that through art these faculties must play a central role in achieving human transcendence. Naturally, music was to be afforded an important place in this conception. Beethoven recognised and articulated this early. In a literary context, works such as the Reflections of an art-loving fiar which included a biography of an imagined musician Joseph Berglinger published by the romantic poet Wackenroder in 1797 identify experiences of transcendence in music and articulate metaphysical fantasies of the following kind:

“Yes, in some passages of the music there seemed finally to fall a particular stream of light into his soul; It seemed to him as if he became suddenly much enlightened and that he viewed with clearer sight and a certain awesome and calm wistfulness the entire busy world from above.”⁵

Wagner and Nietzsche are both children of this romanticism embracing Europe following the French revolution. Wagner in particular famously engaged with the political ideas of this movement early in life and projects and amplifies these in his aspirations as a composer and artist. Furthermore, Wagner was to make the religious terms articulated by Wackenroder the centre of his musical aesthetics. When he met Nietzsche, he recognised immediately that Nietzsche presented an opportunity for him to confirm his claim as a prophet and high priest of a (musical) theology. It became clear early on to Wagner that the young Professor, shy, shortsighted and suffering from incessant migraines, was nevertheless superbly gifted and able to articulate the spiritual importance of music. He would be able to assist in articulating a justification of Wagner’s metaphysical and artistic project.

Nietzsche was no ordinary professor content to excel in academic dispute. Although appointed as a philologist, he developed a consummate and ultimate interest in philosophy and was an able, passionate musician. His thinking was propelled by a musical imagination and by a dramatic inclination. His sensitivities included the intuition that our life demands a classical ability to live in a world constituted by contradictions. His essential philosophical aim was to reveal the profound, metaphysical truth of an inherently paradoxical world through a thinking which was never merely committed to academic study and learning, but informed by experiences of existence which must be practiced, are internalised and are real only in so far as they are lived. Nietzsche, in other words, was a philosopher who thought for his life. Much of Nietzsche’s writing is a dramatisation of the intellect, of spiritual experience, of reflection in the form of a ‘passion play’ of ideas, of concepts, of phenomena, of insight and thinking. There is no academic thought in Nietzsche’s philosophy- his work is entirely sustained by-, inspired by- and dedicated to reflect one phenomenon: life itself with its abysmal, meaningless attributes offering the human being a choice of utter despair or absolute affirmation. Despite his many transformations, Nietzsche consecrates his life to finding and articulating the latter.

Nietzsche’s formative years and the importance of music

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in 1844 in Roecken near Leipzig where his father was a protestant minister. Music is important in the young boy’s life from an early age- not only would he regularly

⁵ Wackenroder, 106

hear the protestant church music, chorales by Luther and Bach, in the church next door to the family residence, his father was also a competent pianist who was known to have improvised on the piano and sang “Lieder” by Robert Schumann. Nietzsche’s father died young- Friedrich was only five – and after some months of agony from an illness then known as “softening of his brain”. Reports of the tormenting symptoms included convulsions, failing eyesight and finally dementia. For Friedrich Nietzsche the trauma of his father’s suffering and death would impress itself on his lifelong consciousness – a horrible experience to a sensitive mind suggesting that life may be abysmally meaningless and that man in any case was subject to indescribable suffering and incomprehensible, wanton death. Nietzsche’s thinking will become a conscious response, a therapeutic exercise to the confronting early trauma of perceiving life as meaningless and death as abysmal. Over this response hangs the question mark of redemption and the experience that music can provide us relief from our suffering.

Following the death of his father and the following, and equally sudden death of his younger brother Joseph – a death which it is reputed the young Nietzsche foresaw in a dreamt vision- Nietzsche’s mother Franziska and her three remaining children move to the nearby town of Naumburg where Nietzsche visits one of the most distinguished schools in Germany: Schulpforta. Founded in 1543 as one of three state schools for male students by the Duke of Saxony, Schulpforta is a leading German school whose students included the poet Klopstock, the philosopher Fichte and the historian von Ranke.

Three aspects of the school’s influence seem to have contributed to Nietzsche’s further direction in life: the school has a respectable choir which Nietzsche joins. He also becomes involved in a small music and literature club in Naumburg during the summer which acquaints him with the music of Richard Wagner. Nietzsche starts composing music and develops a respectable competency in piano playing and improvisation. Academically and spiritually, a classical tradition of learning with an emphasis of a revival of Greek culture inspired substantially by the late 18th century German art historian Johann Joachim Winkelmann directs the interest of the young Nietzsche. Greek ideals, mythology and philosophical wisdom- accessible to German speakers since the Plato translations of Schleiermacher and Schlegel- become central to education of the late 18th and 19th century replacing a singular theological focus on Christianity. Nietzsche will engage increasingly with this world of Greek culture and thinking, continuing to study classics and choosing to become a philologist.

In Schulpforta Nietzsche also meets Ernst Ortlepp, a sixty year old translator of Byron and Shakespeare and a man of excentric and – it seems – undisciplined conduct. Ortlepp becomes a father figure for Nietzsche, writing in turn to the young boy notes of passion. “Never did I think that I would ever love again”⁶ is reportedly written by Ortlepp in Nietzsche’s poetry album.

Ortlepp was a captivating piano improviser in the taverns of Schulpforta. His performance of “demonic ballads” are reported to have mesmerized his young audiences, however, Ortlepp died in 1864, the last year of Nietzsche time in Schulpforta, when he “fell into a ditch in a drunken stupor and broke his neck”.⁷ Ortlepp appears to have been- to use a Nietzschean paradigm- of a thoroughly Dionysian disposition. More importantly to our topic, though, Ortlepp, a political progressive, had met Richard Wagner in 1830 and – in these heydays of revolutionary and romantic fervour and nationalistic sentiment- had discussed with Wagner and the revolutionary Heinrich Laube the rebirth of antiquity and the emancipation of the flesh. It would seem that Ortlepp may have been one of the early sources of Nietzsche’s acquaintance with Wagner and his ideals.

While Nietzsche was familiar with Wagner and his music, his own musical attempts and in particular his autodidactic attempts at composition are firmly focussed on the heroes of German music, Beethoven and Schumann. To be sure, Nietzsche attempts to engage with a heroic musical style and characterisation most notably in a project of an opera on the gruesome topic of the Nordic King “Ermanerich” of which brief sketches survive. However, such attempts are no direct response to Wagner and seem more “Byronesque” in approach. Musically, Nietzsche remains firmly within the classical and early romantic world of Robert Schumann. He writes art-songs and solo-piano works. A notable excursion into dramatic music is a Manfred-Meditation for piano four-hands, a subject which had already inspired Schumann’s Manfred-Overture in 1848.

⁶ Koehler, 16

⁷ Koehler, 17

The subject matter of Byron's Manfred with its gothic overtones appears to have been important to Nietzsche as it was to the romantic imagination in general (Schumann, Tchaikovsky and the romantic composer Carl Reinecke all write works inspired by Manfred). Byron's Manfred refers to a Faustian noble in the Bernese Alps who seeks to influence his fate through invoking magical and supernatural powers. However, the spirits he summons to influence the corporeal world are unable to influence his fate and cannot provide him with the desired redemption in forgetfulness as they cannot influence the events of the past, i.e. time itself. Manfred defies religious temptations and chooses to die rather than submit to higher powers- a Promethian theme of human autonomy, remaining defiant within an essentially tragic existence.

The central notion of "suffering" is established at the beginning of the poem with the identification that "sorrow is knowledge; they who know the most must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth, the tree of knowledge is not that of life." In this condition, we can only seek forgetfulness and oblivion. The central themes of Byron's Manfred will preoccupy Nietzsche throughout his life: the fundamental constitution of life, the relationship of knowledge to life and the overcoming of the abyss that separates life and its meaning. Nietzsche will ultimately find a solution for the puzzle to Manfred's redemption. The absolute affirmation of life and the complete embrace of temporality in an ever-recurring presence (eternal return) dissolve the constitution of temporality and the human dependency on time as past, present and future.

Despite the influence of Ortlepp in Naumburg, it is interesting to note that Nietzsche's musical affinities do not readily and initially embrace Wagner. This changes, though, during his time as a student of classics in Leipzig. One of his university teachers, Friedrich Ritschl introduces Nietzsche to a circle of Wagnerians including ultimately to Wagner's sister Otilie who was married to Ritschl's colleague, the Leipzig Professor Hermann Brockhaus. Having attended performances of Die Meistersinger, Nietzsche now reports an "abiding rapture" towards a music that had seemed to him hitherto bombastic. He also discovers Tristan, a work which will continue to capture his imagination and reflection even or particularly as the case may be when he will have seemingly distanced himself from Wagner in his latter life.

Nietzsche meets Wagner personally for the first time in 1868 in the house of Professor Brockhaus in Leipzig. Their meeting and discussions immediately find a common focus: There is naturally Nietzsche's interest in music, but more importantly, Wagner and Nietzsche are ardent admirers of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). Although ignored and marginalised for most of his life by the philosophical establishment, not only on account of his polemic tendencies, Schopenhauer's writings were receiving considerable attention from 1851 onwards following the publication of a second (1844) and finally third (1859) and expanded edition of his main work The world as Will and Representation originally published in 1819. Wagner came across Schopenhauer's work in 1854 after being introduced to it by the poet Georg Herwegh and recognised immediately the importance of the work for his own direction. Nietzsche reportedly found the work in a local bookstore in 1865 and did not put it down until he had finished reading it.

Schopenhauer

When they first meet, the philosophy of Schopenhauer provided an immediate opportunity for Wagner and Nietzsche to share their common enthusiasm for music and philosophy. This is not surprising for Schopenhauer is the philosopher for whom music is most significant. In fact, Schopenhauer's monumental World as Will and Representation articulates a romantic notion of a congruence of music and philosophy. Schopenhauer does so in the metaphysical identification of "will" as the essence of the cosmos and indeed life itself. He raises the question how such an abstract, undefined and unstructured concept of universal Being can possibly be articulated in a philosophical conceptualisation. Schopenhauer's answer is that this is in fact conceptually possible. Instead, music is the ultimate and most revealing reflection of the will as the metaphysical centre of existence itself.

The "will" as the essence of the cosmos and of life itself implies that all existence is a reflection of some lack, of desire and of ultimate dissatisfaction. This "suffering" of life and pain is best articulated in- and through music. In fact the pleasure of music rests on a lack experienced in real life. However, music does not only comfort our emotional or affective suffering in the face of "will", our inevitable pessimism which is ontologically justified since in a world of eternal becoming nothing is ever fully

achieved or retained, but in fact music expresses the very ontological understanding of the “will” itself analogically. Music expresses the “inner essence, the as-such of all appearance, the will itself”⁸. It does so directly and not through representation which is always indirect and would presuppose a reference to an ontology outside the all-encompassing will- a clear impossibility. Music tears the “veil of the Maya” of appearance which is constituted by the phenomena of individuation and by an appearance of fixed and stable entities. It suggests that beyond this veil lies an entirely amorphous, unstructured and abysmal dynamic of “will”.

The exposed importance of music implies that the musician is an important, even profound figure. His role is to reveal the essence of the world. He is thus comparable to a priest. In particular a composer assumes an elevated position: he (according to Schopenhauer) “reveals the inner essence of the world and articulates the deepest truth, in a language, that his reason does not understand; just like a magnetic somnambulist who has no concept when awake about the things he has revealed.”⁹

Wagner and Schopenhauer’s philosophy

It is not difficult to discover the attractiveness of Schopenhauer’s philosophy for Wagner. On a superficial level, we may suggest that it appeals to Wagner’s well-known egocentrism and to a narcissistic disposition by confirming to the composer his metaphysical entitlement as a high-priest. However, it seems important to attempt to transcend Wagner’s well-known vanity as an explanation for his intense interest in Schopenhauer. One could argue that the enthusiasm for Schopenhauer may in fact stem from an almost opposing need: a need to justify and explain tendencies in Wagner which did not seem acceptable to himself. Schopenhauer offers Wagner the opportunity to explain and perhaps accept his own chaotic tendencies and his excessive erotic desires by justifying them as sources of musical and artistic creativity and by attributing to them metaphysical and ontological relevance. This provides Wagner with an artistic conscience, with a justification and even apology for his character. Within the context of Schopenhauer’s philosophy Wagner’s lust for the feminine can be sublimated and redeems itself in the act of composition and musical creation. Schopenhauer, the heir of Plato, critic of Kant and pre-cursor to Freud explains and renders Wagner’s eros musically and metaphysically productive and thus acceptable.

This constitutes an important step for Wagner, who suffers from his own moral incontinence and corresponding failures. Schopenhauer closes the dissonance between Wagner’s intense desire to be more than just a musician and his intense longing for redemption from this restless and ambitious erotic and artistic drive. Schopenhauer justifies the centrality of the feminine, the obsession with eros in Wagner’s work because the essence of music is inevitably linked to the driving force of life itself. Eros and music both reflect the essence of the world and both express the essence of life. Both suggest a tragic falleness of individual, male existence which is hopelessly stranded in a particular and an individuated appearance. Both establish a striving of the individual towards possibilities for redemption. Wagner’s early works offer to immediate examples: In Der Fliegende Holländer man is condemned to live within an unreal world of torment, of never-ending tedium and of a false particularity until he is redeemed by love and in fact by the feminine itself. In Tannhaeuser the feminine is both a source of falleness (Venus) and also of redemption (Elisabeth). Despite his pilgrimage to Rome Tannhaeuser does not receive forgiveness for his falleness to Venus -redemption only comes when Elisabeth, “holy Elisabeth” sacrifices herself for him.

Nietzsche’s visits to Tribschen

Wagner and Nietzsche found common ground quickly at their first encounter in 1868 and it is thus not surprising that Wagner invites the young student of classics and philology to visit him to his current residence in Tribschen near Lucerne in Switzerland to continue to “talk music and philosophy together”. At the time of their meeting Nietzsche does not know how soon he may be able to take advantage of this invitation. The opportunity to follow it comes sooner to Nietzsche than expected: Only months after their initial meeting Nietzsche is offered a professorship at the University of Basel through recommendation by his teacher Ritschl. He takes up the appointment in 1869 and visits Wagner on Whitsunday of that same year in Tribschen near Lucerne.

⁸ Schopenhauer, WWV I., 345 (§ 52)

⁹ Schopenhauer, WWV I., 344

Wagner had left for Switzerland for the second time in his life in 1865 following a scandalous and protracted affair with Cosima von Buelow in Munich. Cosima was at the time the wife of the conductor Hans von Buelow who premiered Tristan and a daughter of the famous pianist-composer Franz Liszt and Mary d'Agoult. Her marriage to von Buelow had been encouraged by her father Franz Liszt, who himself lived in an illicit relationship with the Countess von Sayn-Wittgenstein while parading as a catholic priest in appearance. According to her own testimony Cosima was desperately unhappy in her marriage to von Buelow and in a relationship in which the husband knew not "what pleased or pained a woman"¹⁰. She suffered from depression and an otherwise theatrical disposition – both a possible outcome of an unhappy life, which isolated her from both her parents on account of their disturbed relationship.

Her adultery with Wagner was thus in some respect inevitable. Thin, lanky and with characteristic Lisztian, even masculine facial features, including a large nose, her feminine attractiveness appears limited. Her liaison with Wagner, nevertheless produced three illegitimate children (Isolde in 1865, Eva and Siegfried in 1869) in quick succession before von Buelow agreed reluctantly to divorce his wife. Wagner and Cosima married in 1870. Before this, their illicit affair had unfolded in Munich where Wagner lived under the patronage of the Bavarian King Ludwig II. Ludwig II, however, decided (on account of increasing public concern about Wagner's and Cosima's immoral existence and their first illegitimate child born in 1865) that Wagner should move to Switzerland where Ludwig established the "greatest German composer" and his mistress Cosima in a country house in Tribschen overlooking Lake Lucerne.

Wagner's affair with Cosima was not an isolated event. In fact, Wagner's life was a continuous succession of – at times- simultaneous relationships. Wagner indulged in affairs with aristocratic women, singers, dancers and wives of patrons, such as the wife of swiss silk merchant Otto von Wesendonck, who became Wagner's mistress while Wagner was staying at his residence. At the time, Wagner was married to his first wife Minna- and- according to one commentator- Wagner added insult to injury when during his liaison with Mathilde von Wesendonck his first wife Minna was "made to serve cold refreshments"¹¹. Wagner's desire for women did not exclude the possibility that he would remain on affectionate and respectable terms with the husbands: Buelow was an intoxicated Wagnerian and despite his almost certain knowledge about his wife's affair would continue to venerate the master and perhaps even knowingly deliver his wife into the "master's" clutches.

For the young Nietzsche, who in his early youth was known as the "little pastor" on account of his proper demeanour and whose sense of morality, ethics and propriety was perhaps if anything overdeveloped, these sordid circumstances of Wagner's life initially may have presented a considerable emotional and psychological hurdle to associate with him. However, following an initial visit in 1869 and falling under the spell of the composer's personality and charisma as well as benefiting from the attention of the "mistress" of the house, Nietzsche's reservations vanished only to re-emerge – indirectly- at a point of a rejection of Wagner which characterises his later period.

Nietzsche visits Tribschen in 1869 and will repeatedly continue to do so despite any moral qualms. Wagner and Cosima welcome him and – recognising a useful spirit- include him in the inner circle of "initiates". Nietzsche is present on the night when Siegfried is born. He is allowed to attend rehearsals and the exclusive performance of the Siegfried Idyll on Cosima's birthday on the 25th of December 1870 – a celebrated private event of music history. Some suggest that Nietzsche was more than duly impressed by Cosima and sought her more intimate attention. In fact, there are frequent occasions when Nietzsche spends time in conversation while the master is either resting or working during his 23 visits to Tribschen following Whitsunday 1896. Nietzsche's own comments about Cosima appear to suggest a form of infatuation- both share common characteristics, they are both impulsive and of course joined by a workshop of Wagner. This infatuation with Cosima is given some credence by a direct reference in Nietzsche's "notes of insanity" from 1889 which refer to Cosima as "Ariadne" and to himself as Dionysos. On some occasions in earlier writings Wagner is referred to as the "minotaur". In a fragment which Nietzsche sent to his publisher in Leipzig only a few days before his well-known breakdown we find the perplexing comments: "... Madame Cosima is by far the most aristocratic nature there is and in relation to me I always interpreted her marriage to Wagner as an extramarital affair... the case of

¹⁰ Koehler, 31

¹¹ Koehler, 28

Tristan”¹². Nietzsche appears to project in these lines the relationship between himself, Cosima and Wagner into the Wagnerian relationship between Tristan (Nietzsche), Isolde (Cosima) and Marke (Wagner).

Be that as it may, there certainly is – at that time- an interest on Nietzsche’s side to be noticed and even to compete for an attention that was usually reserved for the “master”. Nietzsche in return shows himself to be obliging and eager to please. Despite his own considerable workload which comprises duties not only at the University but also at a secondary school, he readily submits to requests of running errands on behalf of the Wagner/Buelow household and purchases items for the Christmas puppet play or undertakes delicate negotiations travelling to Leipzig for a lamp designed by the famous architect Otto Semper on behalf of the Wagner household. A more bizarre form of shopping includes the order to supply underwear for the master himself.

It appears that the relationship between Wagner and Nietzsche develops- despite the intellectual dimension- according to dependency, need and exploitation: Nietzsche needs to escape from a demanding professional existence as a professor and teacher which had quickly become tedious to him and seeks confirmation for the metaphysical importance of music that he senses in the direct contact with Wagner. Wagner and Cosima von Buelow need the legitimation of an acceptable, intellectual society. Their Bayreuth project, which is taking shape during that time, will make the “professor” useful as an advocate and propagandist for this musico-metaphysical dream. Wagner will need an editor of the later Bayreuther Blaetter- a journal designed to propagate Wagnerianism. Nietzsche may come in handy. In the absence of any immediate and official usefulness Wagner will hassle Nietzsche to relinquish his post at Basel University and become the private tutor of his younger son Siegfried when the couple and their children have moved to Bayreuth.

Nietzsche visits Tribschen twenty-three times in total and on occasion of these visits presents himself as a kindred spirit, passionate and visionary thinker and – importantly - also as a pianist and composer. At the same time one can only imagine the struggle for attention which would have been set up by Wagner’s reputed egocentrism and demands to be the centre of attention at all times. At the time Wagner is preoccupied with the completion of his Ring-Cycle. Nietzsche fares well as a pianist, especially when Wagner himself was out on walks. Nietzsche plays to Cosima- not surprisingly, as Wagner himself was a poor pianist (“I play the piano like a rat plays the flute”) some of the master’s compositions in piano reduction to Cosima evoking theatrical and trance-like responses from the “mistress”. By all accounts these were considered favourable responses and somewhat perhaps connected with Nietzsche’s own temperament which was reputed to be prone to rapture, hallucination and ecstasy at the time.

In 1871 Nietzsche presents a composition of his own (Eine Sylvesternacht - in a version for piano four hand) to Cosima Wagner. Cosima reacts politely thanking the “friendly melomaniac” for the birthday gift and New Year’s Eve tribute (Cosima’s birthday was the 25th of December). We cannot help noticing competitive aspects: The birthday present of 1870 of the Siegfried Idyll by Wagner and the birthday present of 1871 of the Sylvesternacht by Nietzsche. While Cosima thus flattered responds politely towards Nietzsche, in private her comments seem to be less polite about Nietzsche’s music as recollections from 1887 indicate. She confides to the conductor Felix Mottl that she could not continue playing the work as she had to laugh too much. Wagner, the “master”, too was found “in full hilarity” following the comment of their swiss servant delivered in broadest dialect that the music “did not seem good to him”.

Nietzsche’s Music

Nietzsche had written music for some time- mostly songs for voice and piano in the idiom of romanticism and his admired composer Schumann, but also piano pieces and works designed for orchestra but awaiting further orchestration. He possessed no formal training in composition which made more complex tasks, such as orchestration, virtually impossible for him. Works written with orchestral ambitions (Manfred, Hymnus) thus were written in four handed piano versions with an intention to seek help with their orchestration. Thus, his contact with Wagner may have also had an ulterior motive: to seek assistance with those aspects of musical composition that Nietzsche did not understand or could not complete himself. In the event Nietzsche’s compositions remained un-

¹² Borchmeyer, 12

orchestrated except for the Hymnus which was orchestrated by the Nietzsche friend and protégé Heinrich Kösselitz (Peter Gast)- a composer Nietzsche would elsewhere praise as the “new Mozart” and whose opera “The lion of Venice” has sunk into the oblivion of music history.

Nietzsche naturally sought the contact with Wagner primarily on musical grounds when he visited Tribschen and perhaps sought a connection to an expertise that was hidden from him until now. We must not forget that acquaintance with Wagner would potentially enable Nietzsche to gain access to some of the leading musicians of the time, including conductors (Buelow, Levi, Mottl, etc). Nietzsche’s own musical interests and ambitions could benefit from these perhaps and Nietzsche would certainly use these avenues. He thus sends his composition Manfred Meditation to Hans von Buelow, Cosima’s husband, only to receive a most critical and devastating reply. Buelow suggests that Nietzsche work constituted the rape of the music by an incompetent dilettante. Introduced by Nietzsche himself in the accompanying letter as “doubtful” and even “excruciating” (entsetzlich) Buelow states that this music displays in his view in fact the “most extreme in fantastic extravagance” and constitutes the “most unproductive and anti-musical” creation he has seen in a long time. He concludes by asking why such a “high and enlightened spirit” has been plunged himself into such “piano cramps”. Cosima adds oil to the fire and insinuates with characteristically manipulative cruelty to Nietzsche directly that in fact Wagner and she shared this assessment.

At the same time, Nietzsche himself remains impressively philosophical about such negative assessments as shown in a letter to his friend Erwin Rohde. He comments that Buelow’s assessment was to him “invaluable in its honesty”. And he defends his music making on the grounds of contributing to his health: He had to write the music – it would have been worse for him if he had not written it. This is an argument, a self interpretation that we also find in relation to Nietzsche’s philosophical writings: writing and composing as activities contributing to a spiritual ‘diet’. Nietzsche writes and improvises as a spiritual exercise, to stay ‘sane’ – Nietzsche writes for his life.

A more lucid and constructive interpretation of this particular composition comes perhaps from Nietzsche’s friend Friedrich Hegar, a violinist and later conductor at the Zürich Opera House. Hegar refers to the work as “interesting” in particular in respect of its ability to capture the underlying mood that it wishes to express. He suggests that “naturally, the execution of musical idea is lacking in architectonic underpinnings so that the composition seems to be more like an evocative improvisation than a structured composition.”

Hegar, it seems, captures in fact the very essence of Nietzsche’s music making: Nietzsche does not write like a professional composer (or as the Germans say a “builder of tones” – Tonsetzer). He composes – as he himself states- for “hygienic” or “dietary” reasons. This form of creation is congruent with the way in which his philosophical texts in their aphoristic structures also lack “architectonic underpinnings”. Nietzsche does not aim to present a structurally impressive and lasting artifice, an artwork, a system of compelling philosophical argument, but he rather needs to discharge himself of an inspiration, a concern. This approach reveals a “mood” in the process – we are reminded of Nietzsche’s own reference to Schiller in the Birth of Tragedy that could serve as a characterisation of himself: “Schiller has identified an observation about the process of writing poetry which remained to him inexplicable but not questionable; he confesses as a preparatory state before act of writing poetry not the conception of a range of images within an ordered causality of thoughts but the intuition of a musical mood (Stimmung). ‘Intuition is for me at first without clear and distinct object. This only forms itself later. A certain musical fundamental mood precedes it, which is then followed by the poetical idea’” (BT, 36/37)

Nietzsche’s musical intuition works in a similar way. It will be for the listener and reader to work through this flowing concern and recover the mood, as it were. His compositions are as fragmentary in nature as are his philosophical works. They are written for an interpreting consciousness that is able to enter into a dialogue with them, that can complement missing links and take any ideas further. Like his writings, his compositions are written for those with ears to hear, for sympathetic listeners who already possess a resonance spectrum for the pathos expressed.

Nietzsche is clear that despite his inability to structure his musical ideas compellingly and in a sophisticated artistic way and despite the fact that he has made a decision to become a writer of philosophical works rather than a composer, he considers himself nevertheless to be a musician in this

most important aspect of being able to intuit the musical pathos. As he writes in 1887 to the conductor Herrmann Levi whom he sends a copy of his Hymnus:

“Perhaps there never was a philosopher who was in reality a musician to the degree that I am one. This does not mean that I could naturally be a completely failed musician”¹³. A further letter to the conductor Felix Mottl Nietzsche goes further to suggest that his music may complement what the “word of the philosopher according to the nature of words is unable to say. The affect of my philosophy expresses itself in this Hymnus.”¹⁴. This claim of the complementarity of music and philosophy is interestingly captured at a stage when Nietzsche no longer composes: The third part of Zarathustra, a culmination of the work concludes with a Yes and Amen Song and declaration of love to eternity that contains the following words: “Are not all words made for the heavy? Do not all words lie to the light one! Sing! Do not speak any longer!” (Z, 476) indicating that beyond what can be expressed lies indeed music. A musician for Nietzsche is not only the professional architect of tonal structures but first and foremost the recipient of musical inspiration and “mood”, the seer of musical truth.

This very characteristic applies, interestingly, most centrally to his philosophy. Despite going through several stages, Nietzsche’s philosophy is not designed to capture a systematic claim. That is, it is not written with a view to presenting a structural entity that could be accessible in a systematic process of interpretation and criticism. It rather present the listeners and readers, those with ears to hear, with a challenge to which they must respond, a riddle that they need to solve and a challenge which they must decide to accept. Nietzsche’s writings are the writings of a “philosophy of life” and are essentially provocative, incomplete and didactic. Nietzsche’s philosophy – like his music- is a directive, a didactic exercise. It leads us towards “higher things”, it is meant to – in the Socratic sense and despite its critique of Socratism- provoke us, to stir us and to elevate us.

With these perceptions of music and philosophy Nietzsche stays true to sentiments expressed already as a 14-year old:

„God has given us music so that we firstly are lead towards higher things. Music combines all characteristics in it. It can elevate, it can tease, it can cheer us up, yes, it can even break the most brazen temperament with its tender and yearning sounds. However, its main aim is to direct our thinking towards higher things, to elevate us and even deeply disturb us...”

Thus Nietzsche’s thinking and music are interestingly congruent: Neither presents us with answers or “solutions”. They direct us, they lead us further- they puzzle us and provoke our wonder and contradiction. Neither his thinking nor his music making can stand on their own without a reader or listener. They require the interpreting consciousness, the critical perception, the engaged consciousness to take up a challenge of an unusual kind. Like a riddle, the listening consciousness is asked to complete the task that is presented to it. Nietzsche remains a challenge and a riddle behind masks.

Nietzsche as writer and philosopher

Despite the importance of music for him, Nietzsche had decided fairly early in his life that the written text- not music – would be his chosen medium in which he would attempt to articulate his existential experience and visions. Nietzsche, as it where, intends to turn towards the “higher things” directly. This decision is an outcome of his radicalism and of his need. Only philosophy can ultimately satisfy a yearning for completeness and self-sufficiency as it does not require compromises- compromises in the form of audiences, patronage and opportunity. However, in order to fully develop his philosophical capacities, Nietzsche must become an accomplished writer and learn to use language in a philosophically productive way.

During his time in Basel, the time when Wagner completes the composition of his Ring Cycle, Nietzsche commences the writing of his philosophical works becoming one of the greatest and most creative German writers. As a writer he does not only shake the foundations of philosophy but he also transforms the possibilities of German language. His writing is at no time academic: It reflects a direct, an urgent concern with life, with his own life, however, from a reflective perspective, a seriousness to get to the issues and to the heart of the matter and a fiery, persistent energy to think through the most fundamental challenges and questions. This is the characteristic of a philosopher: Nietzsche is essentially restless, a wanderer realising that any arrival and solution is an illusion and that it merely presents us with a potential for a turn, for a crisis and for a new beginning.

¹³ cited in Janz, 83

¹⁴ cited in Janz, 83

It seems clear that such an outlook will contribute to an eventual overcoming and to inevitable tensions in his personal relationships and in particular in his relationship with Wagner: Wagner is looking to justify a musical and dramatic vision. His works require practical realities and political co-operation especially at this point in time in – what the philosopher sees to be – a “surface and sign world”. Wagner needs to make compromises and must manipulate the real world in order to be heard. He needs to think about how he will ensure the realisation of his monumental vision of Bayreuth. Without this concern for the real, for the practical and for the every-day Wagner’s compositions will remain silent or misunderstood.

Nietzsche has a completely different focus and can afford to do so: He can be increasingly autonomous and self-sufficient where Wagner must engage in dependencies. Nietzsche is probing into the abyss of human existence and into the chaos of the surrounding cosmos – as he will put it later “6000 feet above the sea”. He seeks to leave presuppositions behind. Wagner’s project is necessarily full of pragmatic and political concerns. It is moulded by boundaries that are constituted by what is practically real, conceivable and even possible. Nietzsche commits to an infinite inquiry, which – to use Nietzsche’s own metaphor- ventures into the open sea and leaves the land behind. Nietzsche seeks to become a free spirit. Wagner’s spirit is – no matter how hard he denies it- subservient to his art and its realisation, bound by the requirements of the subject matter and its material and bound by the social and political conditions of music at the time. No matter how far Wagner expands these, he is ultimately unable to deny them fundamentally if he wishes to remain a celebrated musician and artist and continue to expand his artistic projects. Nietzsche leaves the foundations behind, ultimately at the expense of his coherent existence, it seems. What this indicates is that the relationship between Nietzsche and Wagner must fall prey to the uncompromising radicalism of Nietzsche’s philosophical project.

Birth of Tragedy (1872)

When Nietzsche and Wagner meet, however, Nietzsche’s thinking is still firmly bound by an admiration for Schopenhauer and Wagner. In fact, Nietzsche is – as he describes in his Zarathustra- a camel, a spirit which carries the concerns and questions imposed on him by others. He will transform this attitude fairly quickly to embrace a more aggressively critical stance, for sure, the stance of a lion, but for the time being Nietzsche transforms themes with limited overt radicalism. This is not to say that Nietzsche does not intuitively identify the very issues which will become further concerns. From his later “attempt at a self-criticism” we see how initial concepts develop into problems. However, initially Nietzsche seeks to absorb the philosophy of Schopenhauer and the phenomenon of Wagner.

The Birth of Tragedy written in 1870/1 and dedicated to Richard Wagner sketches what Nietzsche will term his “artist-metaphysics”. Under the influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner, Nietzsche develops an interpretation of music as a fundamental metaphysical, ontological phenomenon. Using the example of Greek tragedy, Nietzsche attempts to show that in fact music constitutes the very essence of Greek tragedy initially and that the unmusical intervention of – what he terms “Socratic” spirit – in fact leads to a demise of the classical tragedy. The foreword to Richard Wagner makes clear, that Nietzsche uses Greek tragedy as a means to and end to identify what he terms a “specifically German and contemporary problem”.

The essay is dedicated to an argument that sees classical tragedy as a combination of two artistic forces: the Apollonian principle of individuation, clarity, structure and concept and the Dionysian principle of community, ecstasy, all-embracing intoxication and dream. According to Nietzsche music is fundamentally Dionysian, representing symbolically the “primordial dissonance, the primordial pain at the heart of the primal one” (BT, 44). This essentially Dionysian quality of music privileges it towards expressing the essential ontological experience of one-ness and of primal chaos which is at the heart of human existence. The tragic experience of human existence is reflected in the mythical story of a Silenus, a teacher and companion of Dionysos, who pressed by King Midas on the question what is the best and most excellent for man answers:

“Abysmal one-day beings, children of chance and of struggle, why do you force me to tell you what you will not perceive as the most likeable. The most excellent cannot be attained by you: not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. The second best, however, is for you to perish soon”. (BT, 30)

The Dionysian experience reflects the abysmal groundlessness and chaos of being which underpins in truth human existence and consciousness. Man is subject to a perception and appearance of

individuation and clarity which however, is not a reflection of Being itself. It is an illusion, a foreground in which we must live and to which we are bound. Man cannot in fact escape this appearance except in the encounter with the Dionysian. Greek Classical tragedy, the dramatic Dithyramb is shaped by the human condition and by a desire to create beautiful appearance and order and at the same time transcend it in a look at the abyss of human existence. Tragedy is determined by a mythos that is musical in essence. It is the realm of the encounter of the Apollonian and Dionysian, the offspring of a marriage between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. It represents the necessary community of the Apollonian and Dionysian principle.

On the basis of this understanding Nietzsche develops a further analysis of the decline of classical tragedy in the works of Euripides. According to Nietzsche, classical tragedy “committed suicide”, overemphasising or perverting the Apollonian principle and committing itself to the “Socratic spirit”. The Socratic spirit stands for a demand that all must be knowable, justified and explained. In Euripidean tragedy, Apollonian intuitions and representations are replaced by “concepts” and Dionysian ecstasy is replaced by “emotions”. This, however, leads to a purge of the Dionysian principle altogether and expels music and mythos from the classical tragedy. Socratic aestheticism transforms the intoxicated and inspired artist into a sober sage. The most telling aspect of this transformation is the Socratic view that knowledge and virtue are congruent. Nietzsche takes up a theme which we saw is articulated in Byron’s “Manfred”: Classical tragedy reflects that “sorrow is knowledge. They who know the most must mourn the deepest over the fatal truth, the tree is knowledge is not that of life” (Byron, Manfred). Against this, the Socratic spirit affirms a congruence of knowledge and ethos and a centrality of reason. This “optimistic” view of theoretical man, that life is subject to knowledge, that virtue is achievable through knowledge and that Being and existence in fact have a meaning is a direct engagement with the Dionysian experience of the primordial and ineffable chaos, Being or nothingness which exceeds human conception.

In his essay Nietzsche does not only apply his paradigm of the Apollonian and Dionysian to classical tragedy and its destruction through the Socratic spirit, but he also applies this paradigm to a discussion of the modern conception of musical drama and Opera. For Nietzsche, opera is characterised by its “stilo representative”, by its “verbal and musical rhetoric of passion” which aims to make man’s condition clear and conceivable. Opera of this kind has an “idyllic tendency” – it has invaded the aesthetic from the ethical and thus appears to be parasitical. However, just as German philosophy of Kant and Schopenhauer dismantled the “complacent pleasure of existence of scientific Socratism”, German music will restore the Dionysian (and Apollonian) principle of musical drama and lead it back to truly artistic foundations. Nietzsche writes:

“The liar and pretender may take care when faced with German Music: since it is this music itself, among our entire culture, the only pure, true and purifying fire-spirit from and towards which all things move, akin to the doctrine of the great Heraclitus of Ephesus, in a double circular movement: everything that we call culture, education, civilisation will one day need to appear in front of the judge who cannot be deceived: Dionysos. Let us recall how the spirit of German philosophy of Kant and Schopenhauer, which flowed from the same sources, was able to destroy the complacent pleasure of existence of scientific Socratism through showing its limitations, how this proof commenced an infinitely more profound and more serious consideration of the ethical questions and of art, which we can directly term the conceptualisation of Dionysian wisdom: Where does the mystery of the unity of German Music and German philosophy point to if not towards a new mode of existence, through which we can inform ourselves in premonitions only through the Hellenic analogies.” (BT 109/110)

Nietzsche prepares for the view that the music drama of Richard Wagner, assisted by the combination of German philosophy and German music leads to a “rebirth of tragedy from the spirit of music” and his pathos knows no bounds when he affirms that the “time of Socratic man is over” and that a “tempest grasps all that is dead, decayed and destroyed, covers it in a red cloud of dust and sweeps it into the air like a vulture” (BT, 113) – the German here is “Geier” making a possible allusion to Wagner’s step-father’s name of Geyer and thus asserting that this clearing is provided by Wagner himself.

Untimely Meditations (1873-1876)

Nietzsche’s veneration of Wagner achieves its climax in the fourth Untimely Meditation which is dedicated to the phenomenon of Richard Wagner in Bayreuth. Using the paradigm of the Birth of

Tragedy of the Dionysian, Nietzsche credits Wagner with a rebirth of tragedy, with the foundation of a realm combining mythos and music akin to the classical tragedy of Aeschylus. However, Nietzsche goes further by linking Wagner to a profound critique of culture: Modern man is essentially alienated and has accepted a relationship towards art that is no longer based on truth:

“The phenomenon of modern man has become altogether semblance; he no longer is visible in what he represents to be- he is rather concealed; and the rest of cunning artistry, which can be found in a people such as the Italians or French, is used to create an art of disguise” (UM, 389)

In this circumstance, Wagner recreates a commitment towards an identity between art and life. We recall that the ontological insight into life as a primordial and essentially abysmal, chaotic force informed the Dionysian experience of classical tragedy. Art provides us with a recovery from the fundamental suffering of life by creating an illusion of “a simpler world, of a shorter solution to the riddle of life”. Nietzsche writes that no-one who “suffers from life, can do without this illusion, just like no one can do without sleep” (UM, 385). Wagner’s merit is his ability to connect music and life and music and drama- his work akin to a circumnavigation of the world, a discovery of art itself. Bayreuth becomes a symbol of this “tragic pathos”. It opens a grand view on art itself and it revitalises the realms of music and language in a simplification of the world. Language, originally destined to achieve a direct and immediate communication about the needs of life among those suffering from it, has become the vehicle for conceptual and conventional communication. Nietzsche alleges, that man is no longer able to truly communicate. As soon as such direct communication is attempted language is “gripped by the madness of universal concepts”. Man adds the suffering of isolation, of misunderstanding and of becoming slave to words and concepts to his fundamental suffering already sustained through life. In this fallen circumstance, Wagner restores an immediacy of communication. His music is a return to nature – in his art we hear “nature transformed into love” (UM, 388).

Nietzsche’s rejection of Wagner

1876 is the year of the publication of Nietzsche’s Fourth Untimely Meditations. It is also the year of the first Bayreuth Festival. Nietzsche’s attendance at the Festival marks a turning point in his attitude to Wagner. Nietzsche’s arrival in Bayreuth spells instant disappointment: Instead of finding a sophisticated audience, which would understand Nietzsche’s profound cultural and philosophical concerns and which shared his vision for a rebirth of art he finds a philistine audience of “emperors, other bigwigs and assorted riff-raff” who have come to the town to smoke cigars, drink beer and enjoy themselves. The heat is oppressive and Nietzsche suffers from migraines and pain in his eyes which compel him to spend much time indoors. Cosima and Richard Wagner who no longer see his usefulness at this time and are pre-occupied with the celebration of their own achievements and their constant need to network with the mighty and important, ignore Nietzsche and treat him indifferently. His usefulness has expired or is at least overridden by other priorities. On a personal level Nietzsche is profoundly disillusioned, but he is still drawn to the intoxicating quality of the music, to the seductive appearance and charisma of the sensual, hidden sexuality of Wagner’s music. Yet, a development has commenced which directs Nietzsche into a fierce rejection of Wagner and a recognition that he is dealing with a “magician”, a phenomenon of decadence and untruth – Nietzsche will describe Wagner as an “illness” and his subsequent work will be concerned with his recovery, his healing. Wagner is becoming for Nietzsche after all a “modern phenomenon”, a phenomenon of pretence, a lie in the grand style.

Much in Nietzsche’s important writings after 1876 are focussed on coming to terms with the issues that underpinned his enthusiasm for Wagner. In addition, Nietzsche realises on a fundamental philosophical level that our search for truth is not complete until we have been able to embrace a critical perspective of the most radical kind. To this effect he will write in his Zarathustra:

“By the best enemies we do not wish to be spared, and neither from those who we love most profoundly. Thus let me proclaim truth to you.” (Z. 311 – Vom Krieg)

Truth and truthfulness require an ability to embrace the most substantial clashes and affirm the most fundamental rejection- this seems to be Nietzsche’s view. The dynamic of thinking which reflects the search for truth on which Nietzsche has embarked as a philosopher required a critical stance to Wagner and all that he (and Nietzsche himself) had believed at the time. This was a natural expectation and occurrence for Nietzsche – natural to the philosopher who rids himself of obsolete views like a snake shedding its skin. It was less comprehensible for Cosima and Richard Wagner of course, who could not sacrifice conviction for perplexity without losing their artistic vision and direction.

Nietzsche's rejection of Wagner is thus – and Nietzsche remarks on that several times- a necessary rejection without personal acrimony. There are some examples that indeed Nietzsche had hoped that Wagner would be able to follow him into this realm of thinking- afterall he sends his Human-All-Too-Human to Wagner knowing full well that many of the philosophical aspects in this work- the exaggerated emphasis of rationality and science- would offend the master.

What is in any case to be kept in mind is that Nietzsche, despite his virulent polemic, never rejects Wagner absolutely: he rather attempts to digest both his admiration and his own objections and rejection philosophically. Wagner is “destructive” but at the same time “essential to the philosopher”. In addition, Nietzsche's attitude and thinking is not simply a reaction to the phenomenon of Wagner. (“Attack is for me a proof of sympathy, in certain circumstances of gratitude”, NCW). Nietzsche's attitude to Wagner is not personal: it is an outcome of his own philosophical work- which co-incides with a rejection and transcendence of Schopenhauer's philosophy and a profound change in the evaluation of fundamental philosophical phenomena including the concepts of life and redemption. In all this, one aspect of his earlier philosophy does not appear to change: Nietzsche's commitment to the concept of the Dionysian. What changes is the role and importance this concept plays in his thinking and in relation to music.

The Case of Wagner (1888), Nietzsche Contra Wagner (1888), Ecce Homo (1908)

Nietzsche writing's from Human, All-too human (1878) onwards all deal with Wagner at some point. Zarathustra (1882) for example makes famous allusions to the dangers of the “magician” and to the stages and transformations of Nietzsche's own development in response. In his philosophy of “self-overcoming”, of the overman and in his conception of the eternal return, Nietzsche attempts to come to terms with the continued challenge posed by Wagner: the concept of redemption and the implicit view of life and human existence which Wagner's conceptions of redemption projects. It is this concept which perhaps illustrates most clearly where Nietzsche must take issue with Wagner. This becomes clear when in The Case of Wagner (1888) he praises Bizet's “Carmen” as an alternative to Wagner's music. The judgement about Bizet as musically less convoluted, less busy, simpler and altogether truer – “this music does not sweat” – appears secondary to the more fundamental issue of the opera's conception of life and “redemption” which is championed by Nietzsche as fundamentally freer and truer. Unlike Wagner, Bizet's love does not need to “possess” – Nietzsche argues. There is no pretence of recovery and there is no dualism or transcendence of human life. Where Wagner's redemption is achieved through the dedication of the feminine in a pledge of love, Bizet's “redemption” – or more appropriately solution - is of an altogether different kind: Don Jose destroys the object of his love indicate the classical conception that hate and love stem from an identical ontology. Wagner seeks redemption (Er-loesung) which suggests a weakness, an outside intervention, a possibility to transcend human life towards a higher form of existence. Bizet seeks resolution (Loesung) which transcends life towards itself and shows it for what it is.

According to Nietzsche's view Carmen preserves the “tragic” view of life, the view that love and hate belong essentially together. Nietzsche praises the final words of Don Jose: “It is me that killed her”- the defiant attitude of Manfred, of Prometheus which does not shrink away from the essential contradictoriness of human existence. This does not provide a comfortable solution, it does not communicate optimism as proposed in eg. Tannhaeuser. Wagner's preoccupation with redemption denies the demand for questioning and for searching. He returns to the Christian concept “you should and must believe” and thus identifies himself- as Nietzsche indicates- as an “actor” and as a “decadent”. His preoccupation with “pity” and “innocence” in the Parsifal constitutes a sickness which yearns for life as it is not and communicates this “passion” through sensuality of sound. Wagner uses the supreme beauty of musical aesthetics to hide a metaphysical deception.

At the same time his music is filled with metaphysical and religious preoccupation and symbolism and his art makes claims for metaphysical profundity it can never fulfil. Wagner's failure is that he intended his music to be more than music- Nietzsche now asserts:

“Indeed he repeated his entire life one sentence: that music does not only mean music! But more! But infinitely more!... Not only music- no musician talks that way. To say it again, Wagner was unable to create from a totality, he had no choice, he had to make piecemeal. “Motifs”, gestures, formulas, doubled and onehundredfold, he remained a rhetor – he had to fundamentally move the “it refers” into

the foreground. “Music is always only a means” was his theory – that was first and foremost his only possible praxis. However, no musician thinks that way.” (FW, 924)

Wagner, Nietzsche affirms had no choice- no musician has a choice because music cannot take on the symbolic, metaphysical responsibility that it is given. Instead, we are faced with an art that claims more than it can be. Nietzsche ultimately objects to Wagner on “health” grounds: Wagner seduces us towards a metaphysical fiction through intoxication. He attempts to overcome his suffering (which Nietzsche continues to admire in so far as it manifests itself in the music) by intoxicating himself and others, by escaping into an otherworld. However, Nietzsche argues from a philosophical perspective that such an escape is not possible and any other-world is an illusion. God is dead- this insight leaves us with no choice but to abandon metaphysical redemption of the kind advocated by Wagner. Instead we must affirm life in its essentially meaningless, abysmal characteristics and attempt to gain “height”, lightness and “air” provided by increasing clarity. Wagner’s music increases Nietzsche’s demands for “fresh air”. With its Christian overtones, Wagner’s work closes itself in, it suffocates itself in its metaphysical hopes for transcendence and redemption of a traditional kind which – as Nietzsche’s philosophical analysis shows- establishes the very barriers which it wishes to transcend in the first instance. The philosophical solution Nietzsche proposes to the “otherworldliness” is the emphasis on the real, the here-and-now, the temporality of the present. This does not exclude the fact that Nietzsche, too, suffers from life. However, as he points out in Nietzsche Contra Wagner, this is an altogether different form of suffering:

“However, there are two types of sufferers, one that suffer from an overflowing of life, who wish for a Dionysian art and precisely a tragic insight and overview of life – and then those who suffer from a poverty of life, who demand calm, stillness, calm seas or intoxication, ecstasy, anaesthesia from art and philosophy.” (NCW, 1047)

Nietzsche takes issue with Wagner, because the latter ultimately denies life. Such a denial is for Nietzsche unacceptable on philosophical grounds. It falls short of doing justice to the phenomenon, no matter how attractive this “hate of life” may be and no matter how intoxicating the proposed escape. Ultimately, the denial of life in Wagner’s works undermines life itself. This seems to Nietzsche to be most pronounced in Parsifal which he alleges is “a work of cunning, of revenge, of secret poisoning of the foundations of life, a bad work – the sermon of asceticism is a provocation to deny nature: I have contempt for anyone who does not regard Parsifal as an attack on morality.” (NCW, 1053). In fact, according to Nietzsche Parsifal is a subject for an “operetta” in this blind and naïve return to a Christian form of redemption that the philosopher must recognise as obsolete and untruthful.

Stellar Friendship

We can see from these comments that it is Nietzsche’s philosophical thinking and development which demand a rejection of Wagner. The visit to the first Bayreuth Festival confirms an intuition in Nietzsche that he must become autonomous and completely self-sufficient in his reflection. This in turn demands a qualification of his relationship with Wagner, including a rejection of Wagner and a denial of any uncritical following of the Wagnerian artist-metaphysics which has shown itself to be philosophically groundless. Nietzsche calls such rejection “forms of contrast in the optic of value” which are necessary to recognise a phenomenon in its full truth. The philosopher must descend into his last abyss to establish the truth of the questions at hand and to establish himself as a philosopher. For Nietzsche this is (and it includes his treatment of Wagner) his “philosophy with a hammer”.

However, on an aesthetic level, on the level of musical intuition and musical sensibility Nietzsche remains to the last infatuated with Wagner. He refers in particular to the Siegfried Idyll and to Tristan whose beauty captivates him to the end. He articulates this in relation to Parsifal when he states: “Parsifal... I admire this work, I would have liked to have created it myself. Failing this I understand it... Wagner was never more inspired than at the end. The refinement in the combination of beauty and sickness goes so far here that it casts a shadow over Wagner’s earlier works...”¹⁵

In this context then, Nietzsche rejection of Wagner is an aspect only. It is a requirement towards philosophical comprehensiveness, it is driven by the uncompromising attempt to transcend particulars, the particulars of Wagner’s creativity and existence in this instance, and to reach an albeit lonely

¹⁵ FW, 930

viewpoint from which Nietzsche could affirm life in its abysmal ambivalence and chaos purely in and through himself. For his relationship with Wagner this means, that the dynamic of its development is far more relevant than its end point. Nietzsche himself articulates something like this in fragment 279 entitled “stellar friendship” from the “Gay Science”:

“We were friends and have become strangers. But this is right so, and we do not wish to hide and obscure this as if we are embarrassed by it. We are two ships, of which each one has its path and its aim. We can certainly cross paths and celebrate together, as we have done and the two ships then lay so calmly in one harbour that it seemed they had already arrived and had one aim. But then the omnipotent power of our task dispersed us, into different seas and into different realms, and perhaps we will never meet again- perhaps we will meet again but not recognise each other: the different seas and different suns have changed us. That we have to become strangers is the law above us. Precisely for this reason shall we hold the thought of our previous friendship sacred. There is probably an immense, invisible curve and stellar path in which our different paths and aims are contained as small parts- let us elevate ourselves to this thought. But our life is too short and our vision too weak for us to be more than friends in the sense of this awesome possibility. – And thus let us believe in our stellar friendship even though we must be mutual enemies on earth.” (FW, Frag. 279)

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Abbreviations

FW: Nietzsche, Der Fall Wagner

WWV: Schopenhauer, Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung

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