

THE REINVENTION OF GENIUS

WAGNER'S TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOPENHAUER'S AESTHETICS IN "BEETHOVEN"

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I. INTRODUCTION

Wagner's treatise *Beethoven* (1870), written to celebrate the centenary of Beethoven's birth, is one of his most influential theoretical works. Its influence on Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* is well known, and Gustav Mahler regarded it as one of the most profound writings on music he knew, on a par with Schopenhauer's theory on the subject.

Wagner's main concern in this text is to bring his theory of opera into line with his recent 'conversion' to Schopenhauer's philosophy. It contains an account of the relation of music and drama which emphasizes the superiority and dominance of music, true to the philosopher's ideas on this subject. This aspect of *Beethoven* is in fact the main focus of most commentaries devoted to this work.¹

Such commentaries often give the general impression that Wagner leaves Schopenhauer's philosophy largely intact, merely adapting his own ideas to make them fit those of his new mentor.² In this paper I want to challenge this assumption. I will try to show that, on the contrary, Wagner introduces dramatic changes to Schopenhauer's aesthetic doctrine, changes that together amount to a substantial transformation of the philosopher's thought. To illustrate this, I will concentrate on the

¹ See Stein (1960), p 157-165 for a good example of this approach. Also Bruse (1984), Borchmeyer (1982), Dinger (1892).

² This is particularly noticeable in Magee (2000), p. 229-300.

following aspects of Wagner's text: the relation of music and self-consciousness, the question of the position of the musical 'genius' and Wagner's categorization of music as the art of the 'sublime'.

II. SCHOPENHAUER'S AESTHETICS

A main feature of Schopenhauer's aesthetic doctrine is the idea that artistic experience represents a mode of knowledge that is fundamentally exceptional. Schopenhauer holds that human knowledge and experience are mainly determined and guided by the will to live. This implies, among many other things, that we normally take an *interest* of one kind or another in the objects of our cognition. It is possible however, according to Schopenhauer, for our knowledge to emancipate itself from this subservience to the *will*. The 'subject of knowing' can detach itself from the 'subject of willing'; a 'pure', will-less, form of knowing then occurs. The fact that such 'pure cognition' is not guided by the will to live has the consequence that the object of cognition also becomes transformed: in aesthetic contemplation the Platonic *idea*, the essential nature of the object, stands revealed. The artistic 'genius' sees through the veil of mere appearance and glimpses the timeless *ideas* lying at the basis of them, while in addition having the imaginative ability to translate this experience into the creation of works of art.

Schopenhauer's view of art is fundamentally hierarchical. Different art-forms deal with different grades of objectification of the *will*. The highest art-form, however, is not that which has the highest *idea* (for Schopenhauer that is the human being) as its object, as one would expect. Music surpasses all other forms of art because it does not depict *ideas*, but is a direct expression or copy of the *will* itself. This is the reason why Schopenhauer believes that music means the most to us of all the arts, for it speaks of the essence, while other art-forms depict only the 'shadow', to follow Schopenhauer's highly Platonic expression. (WWR I, 217)

This theory raises several problems concerning the precise place of music in Schopenhauer's aesthetics. What, for instance, is the status of the musical artist, whose object is not the Platonic *idea* but the '*will*' itself? How, furthermore, can this musical artist still be seen as the detached viewer who represents Schopenhauer's ideal of

artistic cognition? If such detachment cannot be maintained in the case of music, what then is music's status as an art?

III. WAGNERIAN CONTRIBUTIONS

Few were as aware of such problems as Richard Wagner. In his *Beethoven*, the composer seeks to address these issues by developing a very personal musico-philosophical argument. Wagner states that, while in Schopenhauer these questions are not answered satisfactorily, the philosopher nonetheless offers enough material to supplement his thought. This means we have to look at other areas of the philosopher's work to enrich his account of music. As a first result of this strategy, Wagner observes that we must regard our inner experience as the basis of the musical conception.³ If music is a direct expression of the *will*, the musical conception must have its 'origin' in that aspect of consciousness which is, according to the philosopher, most directly aware of the '*thing-in-itself*'. In Schopenhauer that is our inner consciousness of ourselves.

After making a detour into the area of Schopenhauer's theory of clairvoyance, which I will not consider here, Wagner then discusses the musical artist.⁴ The 'inspired' musician is fundamentally different from other artists, who as 'pure subjects' achieve a detached state of contemplation of the *idea*. The musician, whose object is the very '*thing-in-itself*', is also fundamentally different as a subject: he is in a state of identification or 'merging' with the universal *will*.

Instead of the serene cognition which is the goal of other artists, the musician's element is "highest movement of the *will*". The overcoming of individuality which for the other arts is achieved through pure will-less cognition, is reached differently by the musician, in whom the *will* 'feels itself unified' across all boundaries of appearance.

Having defined the nature of the musician in this way, Wagner goes on to address the question of the special status of music as an art. He states that we cannot judge the art of music with the category of the purely 'beautiful', as is done so often. In Schopenhauer, beauty is defined strictly in terms of the representation of *ideas*. For

³ Wagner (1896), p. 67

⁴ Ibid. pp. 71-72

Wagner, the conclusion from this must be that we can judge music only from the perspective of the aesthetic category of the 'sublime'.⁵

It seems clear that Wagner considers this dramatic and somewhat confusing expansion of Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory as being largely consistent with the main tenets and values of that system. It remains to be seen if that point of view can be maintained, however. I will examine three decisive moments from Wagner's discourse in greater detail in order to get a clearer view of the development of Wagner's position compared to that of Schopenhauer.

IV. MUSIC AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

By establishing a connection between music and self-consciousness at the outset of his argument, Wagner shows himself in accord with many subsequent commentators. The association of music with 'inner sense' is made so often in discussions about Schopenhauer's philosophy that one is tempted to overlook the fact that this is not a connection that Schopenhauer himself establishes at any point.⁶

The argument, though, seems obvious enough. Music, according to Schopenhauer, is the most immediate expression of the *will*. When we combine this with Schopenhauer's theory that self-consciousness grants us the most immediate apprehension of the *will*, the association can be readily made.

...the inner knowledge is free from two forms belonging to outer knowledge, the form of space and the form of causality which brings about all sense-perception. On the other hand, there remains the form of time (...) Accordingly, in this inner knowledge the thing-in-itself has indeed to a great extent cast off its veils, but still does not appear quite naked. (...) Yet the apprehension in which we know the stirrings and acts of our own will is far more immediate than is any other."⁷

For Schopenhauer, the element of immediacy belongs to both the experience of music and the experience of the self. An additional argument concerns the element of time in both modes of apprehension. Schopenhauer followed the Kantian distinction between time as the form of inner, and space as that of outer, sense. By accepting that time is

⁵ Ibid. pp. 77-78

⁶ For examples: Magee (1997), p. 184; Foster (1999), p. 241, 246.

⁷ Schopenhauer (1819) Vol. 1, p. 230

also the parameter in which the cognition of music takes place, we have another reason to connect inner sense with the experience of music.

This first of Wagner's 'clarifications' of Schopenhauer's theory of music, then, seems quite uncontroversial. One thing must be born in mind, however. Notwithstanding the above observations, Schopenhauer had a good reason not to make an explicit connection between music and self-consciousness. Inner awareness is, for Schopenhauer, more or less *opposed* to artistic experience. The willing self is the opposite pole from the pure subject of knowing, the subject of all artistic cognition. Disinterestedness, a disconnection from the empirical self, is one of the most distinctive elements in Schopenhauer's aesthetics taken as a whole. The fact that music is discontinuous from the other arts does not entail that for Schopenhauer the condition of disinterestedness doesn't apply to music. This makes Wagner's connection of music and inner awareness problematic. Wagner is fully aware of this fact, and proposes a solution.

V. MUSICAL GENIUS

To reconcile his notion that musical conception arises from our self-consciousness with Schopenhauer's demand for artistic disinterestedness, Wagner makes a highly personal proposition, which has no precedent in Schopenhauer: he identifies the musical Genius with the *de-individualized basis* of the personal subject of willing. The musical artist 'awakens' in a state of identification with the universal *will* itself. In a way, this can be regarded as an interesting attempt to fill up a certain lacuna in Schopenhauer's account of the artist. Schopenhauer's conception of genius is in terms of the contemplation of *ideas*. Since music does not involve *ideas*, we could ask whether Wagner is in fact not free to characterize the musical genius in entirely different terms, as he does here? When we look at Wagner's description of musical genius, however, we see that Wagner strays dramatically from the spirit which permeates the whole of Schopenhauer's aesthetics. Instead of the elevated, serene detachment from the self which is Schopenhauer's ideal of artistic contemplation, Wagner describes a 'dissolving' of the self in a state of intoxication, bringing about a unity with the *will*:

This prodigious breaking-down the floodgates of Appearance must necessarily call forth in the inspired musician a state of ecstasy wherewith no other can compare: in it the will perceives itself the almighty Will of all things: it has not mutely to yield place to contemplation, but proclaims itself aloud as conscious World-Idea.⁸

This is clearly the voice of the composer of *Tristan und Isolde* and not that of the writer of *The World as Will and Representation*. The Dionysian flavour of this fragment is conspicuously absent from anything Schopenhauer has to say about the artist. On the contrary: there are clear signs that the state of deep involvement which Wagner associates with the experience of music is far from the philosopher's mind:

Thus we here (in music, MB) see the movements of the will transposed to the area of the mere representation⁹ that is the exclusive scene of the achievements of all the fine arts. For these positively demand that the will itself be left out of account, and that we behave in every way as purely knowing beings. Therefore the affections of the will itself, and hence actual pain and actual pleasure, must not be excited, but only their substitutes, that which is in conformity with the intellect as a picture or image of the will's satisfaction, and that which more or less opposes it as a picture of image of greater or lesser pain.¹⁰

His predominantly negative vision of artistic pleasure, in which the temporary liberation from the demands of the *will* is the decisive factor, is something Schopenhauer wants to retain in his account of the experience of music. "Only in this way does music never cause us actual suffering, but still remains pleasant even in its most painful chords..."¹¹ The pleasure Schopenhauer refers to is, as is obvious from the fragment above, the joy of pure cognition rather than the Wagnerian joy of intoxication. Schopenhauer is able to translate this view into a compelling image: in life we are the string that is played, whereas in music we only hear it, solely through tones and their mathematical relations.¹² This shows how far Schopenhauer stands from Wagner's ideal of deep immersion in the *will* as a model for the musical genius.

⁸ Wagner (1896) p. 72

⁹ I prefer this translation to Payne's "tinted with the province of representations".

¹⁰ Schopenhauer (1819) Vol. 2, p. 451

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

VI. MUSIC AND THE SUBLIME

A final moment in Wagner's discourse I will comment on is his claim that music should be judged according to the category of the sublime, rather than the beautiful:

Music, who speaks to us solely through quickening into articulate life the most universal concept of the inherently speechless Feeling, in all imaginable gradations, can once and for all be judged by nothing but the category of the sublime; for, as soon as she engrosses us, she transports us to the highest ecstasy of consciousness of our infinitude.¹³

At this point we meet a difficulty of interpretation. Wagner fails to give any systematic guidance as to what he means by the sublime, other than offering this florid description of music as the sublime art. Dieter Borchmeyer has shed some light on this issue. In his study *Das Theater Richard Wagners* he points to several aspects of the theory of the sublime, as it was developed in Kant, Schiller and later also Schopenhauer, that may be recognized in this passage.¹⁴ First of all, in these theories the experience of the sublime is accompanied by a 'movement of the soul', while by contrast in the experience of the beautiful we remain in restful contemplation. Furthermore, the experience of the sublime involves the concept of infinitude. Finally, the sublime is associated with inward, rather than outward, experience.

As we have seen, this last element, that of interiority, has been associated with music by Wagner from the beginning. Also, the combination of the first two elements, that of the movement of the soul and that of a feeling of infinitude, seems clearly on Wagner's mind where he associates the sublime with the 'highest ecstasy of consciousness of our infinitude'. From this we can at least conclude that there is a certain continuity in Wagner's thought when he associates music with the sublime. As we saw, the 'inspired musician' was described by Wagner as one who looks inwards, and in whom the highest movement of the *will*, a state of ecstasy, is accompanied by the suspension of individuality, an immersion in the boundlessness of the universal *will*. This fits well with his identification of music as sublime, if this is interpreted in the way Borchmeyer suggests. Wagner distinguishes the beautiful from the sublime

¹³ Wagner (1896), p. 77

¹⁴ Borchmeyer (1982), pp. 118-9

employing the same schema he used to distinguish the plastic from the musical artist: outward, detached contemplation in the one case, and inward exaltation in the other.

Although key aspects of the classical theory of the sublime may thus be recognizable in Wagner's description of music, it must be stressed that Wagner ends up with an interpretation of the sublime that is severely at odds with both Kant's and Schopenhauer's. Anyone familiar with the Kantian sublime recognizes that Wagner completely neglects the emphasis on reason that is of such paramount importance in that theory. But also the Schopenhauerian sublime, where that emphasis is lacking, does not count as a convincing model for the Wagnerian conception. Most importantly, Schopenhauer simply does not associate music with the sublime. This is no mere neglect, but has a philosophical background. We saw that in Wagner the difference between the sublime and the beautiful is mapped on to the difference between music and the other arts. In Schopenhauer this is not the case. For him, the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime are distinguished by the manner in which the pure subject of knowing detaches itself from the subject of willing. In the contemplation of beauty, the pure subject of knowing has achieved the upper hand in consciousness without struggle, helped by the very beauty of the object, i.e. those qualities of the object that facilitate the knowledge of the *idea*.¹⁵ The feeling of the sublime, on the other hand, occurs in the presence of forces that are potentially threatening to the individual, for instance when we encounter an impressive natural phenomenon. Also in such circumstances, a state of pure contemplation can be reached, but we have to force the pure knowing subject to elevate itself above our individuality.¹⁶

This conception of the sublime has a number of implications in the context of the present discussion. In the first place, the Schopenhauerian sublime is restricted to the contemplation of *ideas*, and therefore unsuited for the association with music that Wagner seeks. Furthermore, although the movement of the *will* plays a significant part in Schopenhauer's account of the sublime, the pure, undisturbed cognition of the subject remains the deciding factor. This means that the Dionysian connotations that we meet in Wagner's description of sublime feeling are not true to the spirit of the philosopher's account of the sublime. As Dale Jacquette has put it, in Schopenhauer's account of the encounter of the sublime “the individual will ultimately confront its

¹⁵ Schopenhauer (1819), Vol. 1, p. 202

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204

limitations, and senses something like the raw energy of the world as *will*, while glorifying in the superiority of its perception and knowledge over the world as appearance, alone on the precipice with the haunting strains of a Wagnerian opera thundering in the distance.”¹⁷ This image is quite suitable to illustrate the fundamental difference in Schopenhauer's and Wagner's conceptions of the sublime and the status of the musician. For clearly, in Wagner's case, the musician is cast as the vibrating string in that same orchestra which, with Schopenhauer, is contemplated from a distance. In comparing this account of the feeling of the sublime with Wagner's, we thus encounter the same fundamental differences of the philosopher's thought and the artist's vision as before. For Schopenhauer, in the feeling of the sublime the pure subject of knowing remains essentially in its state of elevated distance. Again, in Wagner this distance vanishes completely, the result being an image of ecstatic and intoxicated unity with the *will*.

It should be clear that this is no mere detail but a central point of difference with significant implications. In Wagner we find the seeds of what later, in Nietzsche, will turn into a full-blown Dionysian affirmation of life. Seen in that light, Wagner's interpretation threatens the very core of Schopenhauer's philosophy of pessimism.

¹⁷ Jacquette (1996), p. 22

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