

Chapter 2

Early Years and Training

He who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance: one cannot fly into flying.¹

Music played a large role in Friedrich Nietzsche's life from a young age. He was born in Röcken, Prussia on 15 October 1844 to Karl Ludwig Nietzsche, a Lutheran minister, and Franziska, *née* Oehler, a doting mother. The importance of music in the Lutheran church must have been especially evident in the Nietzsche household, as virtually all Friedrich's early memories were of musical events. An excellent example of this correlation came when Nietzsche was only five years old and his father died. In later memoirs, Nietzsche reflected that the tolling of the bells and solemn organ hymns were what he associated with the tragic event. "At one o'clock in the afternoon, the ceremony began with a great ringing of bells. Oh, their hollow pealing will never fade from my ears, never will I forget the somberly thundering melody of the song 'Jesu meine Zuversicht!'"² The year after his father's death, Nietzsche had an unusual dream in which the bells and organ returned, and shortly thereafter his younger brother died. Although Nietzsche attributed prophetic overtones to this event, it can better be explained by Nietzsche's refined powers of observation and his mother's anxious behavior regarding her sick infant. This association between bells and death was strong enough to appear throughout Nietzsche's works, both musical and philosophical.

¹ TSZ, 195: III, On the Spirit of Gravity, 2.

² HK I, 5-6.

Although there is no evidence that Nietzsche received formal musical training before he entered the Gymnasium, his position as eldest son of a Lutheran minister makes it probable that he received some instruction in this area. Nietzsche's father played the organ and piano, was known for his ability to improvise at the keyboard, and sang well enough to carry out his duties as a Lutheran pastor. Judging from German protestant practices of his day, young Friedrich was probably exposed to traditional Lutheran hymns, occasional Bach choral works and a reasonable amount of sacred music by Handel and Haydn. His own remembrances list Haydn's *Creation*, Mozart's *Requiem*, and Handel's *Judas Maccabeus* and *Messiah* as being performed in the Naumburg cathedral.³ In fact, Nietzsche attributed his first foray into musical composition to a performance of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." Shortly after hearing the piece, the nine-year old Nietzsche and a friend were improvising on the piano and began setting Biblical texts in the style of Handel. According to Nietzsche, they then notated their newly written composition.⁴ This recollection tells us much about Nietzsche's musical training up to that point. His instruction must have included more than occasional lessons, and it is probable that a member of the church chorus met regularly with the young student. Fuelled by his obvious love for music, these lessons had apparently, by the time he was nine, enabled Nietzsche to read and notate music. His critical listening abilities are evidenced by the effective adoption of Handel's style in his youthful work, as reported by Nietzsche himself upon later reflection (if Nietzsche's adult recollections are to be believed). His earliest surviving musical work dates from the next year, when he wrote

³ Curt Paul Janz, "The Form-Content Problem in Nietzsche's Conception of Music," *Nietzsche's New Seas*, trans. Thomas Heilke (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988), 97-116.

⁴ HK III, 67.

out some melodic fragments. Although no more than twenty-one measures long, their systematic exploration of triadic harmonies provide evidence of further music instruction (ex. 1, all musical examples can be found in Appendix C).⁵

After his father's death, the family moved from Röcken to Naumburg, where Friedrich attended the *Gymnasium*. While enrolled, he received additional music training from the school's Cantor and possibly others. It was also during this time that Nietzsche met Gustav Krug and a friendship began that would last through much of Nietzsche's life. Krug hailed from a family of excellent amateur musicians, and Nietzsche's experiences in the Krug household were filled with music. Such musical *soirée*'s occasionally included some of Germany's best musicians. Although generally conservative, the Krug family was familiar with a broad spectrum of contemporary music, including that of Liszt and Berlioz.⁶ Nietzsche's reflections on his and Gustav's musical experiences indicate the thoroughness of his friend's musical training, and it can be assumed that Nietzsche supplemented his own lack of musical refinement with lessons from Krug. Despite his exposure to the New German School, by the time Nietzsche was fourteen he was a staunch musical conservative. In one notebook, Nietzsche described his tastes as follows: "I also feel an undying hatred towards all modern music and all that is not classical. Mozart and Haydn, Schubert and Mendelssohn, Beethoven and Bach, these are the soul of German music and in them I am grounded."⁷ While the vehemence of this diatribe is harsh even for Nietzschean standards, it must be understood as the expression of a fiery fourteen year old newly enamored with his recently discovered

⁵ MN, 167.

⁶ HK I, 12-13.

⁷ HK I, 18.

poetic abilities. This is not the only evidence of young Nietzsche's conservatism. In other letters and notebooks Nietzsche describes "Zukunftsmusik" as unhealthy, superfluous and dangerous. His practice lists also reflect this view, shunning contemporary works in favor of the easier Beethoven sonatas, and pieces of Bach, Schubert and Mendelssohn.⁸

From extant manuscripts, it is apparent that the compositions included on these practice lists not only supplied Nietzsche with material to better his pianistic skills, but also acted as instructional manuals for the intellectually hungry young student. There are brief fragments of music written in the style of Beethoven, Bach or Handel where Nietzsche's attempts at thematic development and contrapuntal writing can be seen. His two "Sonaten" represent his earliest completed compositions, dating from 1856, and reflect his simultaneous study of Beethoven sonatas during that period. While strangely lacking any form that could be described as a sonata, these compositions do display many typically Beethoven-esque characteristics. He writes frequent significant dynamic changes, and the bulk of the work is comprised of chordal expansions. The vehemence of the tonic-dominant interchange comprising the ending of the piece might be compared to the finale of Beethoven's fifth symphony if it were not for the lack of any developmental material preceding it. Several of Nietzsche's gross exaggerations of Beethoven's music can be seen in the coda (ex. 2).

⁸ Frederick R. Love, *Young Nietzsche and the Wagnerian Experience* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1963); 6.

Later, in a sketch scored for piano four-hands (a compositional tool Nietzsche used throughout his life) entitled “Allegro con brio,”⁹ obvious Handelian influences can be seen (ex. 3). Typical early-classical chord progressions are elaborated through the use of several standard techniques, including repeated quarter note chords, Alberti bass, and tremolo broken chords. Above this can be found a mixture of chorale type melodies and dotted rhythms reminiscent of Handel’s oratorios.¹⁰ As most of the preliminary compositional work was carried out through improvisation at the piano, the written fragments reflect second or third drafts and are still instructive in regards to his self-training. The scoring of this particular work for piano four-hands seems to have been standard operating procedure. Virtually all of his larger works were first sketched for piano duet, and as was the case with several works, these preliminary versions are all that survive. The piano duet medium is one that came naturally to Nietzsche. In addition to his musical evenings at the Krug household in which duet improvisation was a favorite activity, he and his sister Elisabeth also took great pleasure in improvising at the piano together.¹¹ In his last years in Naumburg before leaving for boarding school, he and Elisabeth renewed this childhood habit, spending many long evenings together at the piano.¹² In fairness to Nietzsche, both of these works should be viewed as purely pedagogical exercises and the many errors of technique and judgment attributed to youth and inexperience.

⁹ MN, 186-189.

¹⁰ See ex. 2.

¹¹ MN, 345.

¹² Ibid.

It was also during this time that Nietzsche began studying the works of Johann Georg Albrechtsberger. Having composed many preludes, fugues, and chorales, Albrechtsberger is now better known for his pedagogical accomplishments. These include teaching Beethoven, Hummel, Moscheles and Weigl, as well as writing several well-known theoretical treatises. It is very likely that Nietzsche owned a copy of the 1837 edition of his *Sämmtliche Schriften über Generalbaß, Harmonielehre, und Tonsetzkunst; zum Selbstunterricht*.¹³ Several fugue-writing exercises in Nietzsche's hand exist from this time bearing a strong resemblance to Albrechtsberger's tutorials.¹⁴ There also exist several motet fragments, further attesting to Nietzsche's baroque influences. A motet entitled "Hoch tut euch auf" is dated December 1858, and another entitled "Jesus meine Zuversicht" was written soon after.¹⁵ A fragment of his fugal exercises bears Nietzsche's notes on the back recording an upcoming performance of Handel's *Messiah* in Naumburg.

Considering Nietzsche's musical influences, his love for the oratorio—a quintessentially baroque genre—comes as no surprise. A Christmas wish list from 1858 includes a request for Haydn's *Creation* and praise for Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.¹⁶ When taken in conjunction with his scorn for more modern music, his conception of the diametric opposition between oratorio and opera also makes sense. While most of his excoriations of modern music rarely cite specific points of concern, his attacks on opera are frequently quite specific. It seems that Nietzsche viewed opera as standing opposed

¹³ Love, 87.

¹⁴ MN, 202-3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 324.

¹⁶ HK I, 35.

to oratorio, the latter a form he held in the highest regard. Nietzsche praises oratorio in its “scorn for all other means” and chastises opera for “making use of them (other means) for effect.”¹⁷ When music is used for mere effect, it becomes “accompaniment” and “no other sense is excited other than the ear.” For Nietzsche, the oratorio represented this proper union of text and music, in which both mediums were allowed to operate in optimal conditions. Opera, on the other hand, adopted theatrics to manipulate the audience, and correspondingly degraded music as a means to an end. His notebooks reveal his research into the history of opera, and an essay and several fragments survive that explore the history of opera.¹⁸ It is obvious in these early letters (the above dates from 1861 when Nietzsche was only sixteen) that Nietzsche holds music in the highest esteem due to its ability to uplift and empower the listener. Insofar as Nietzsche himself experienced this transformative power, he has left us numerous descriptions. One such experience is found in a letter to his sister in which he describes a trip his Schulpforta choir took to Cologne. Despite finding no lodgings and resorting to sleeping on restaurant benches, the beauty and power of the night’s music alone made it not only bearable, but even delightful.¹⁹

This transformative power of music derived from the fundamental level at which music conveyed expression. From these early letters and other essays, one can begin to put together a conception of Nietzsche’s early aesthetic. In poetry written in 1859 and 1860, naturalistic themes appear frequently in which understanding and wisdom are

¹⁷ HKB I, 125.

¹⁸ HK II, 64-67.

¹⁹ Middleton, 8.

derived from communion with nature.²⁰ This communion is frequently brought about by song, and allows the individual to go beyond the surface of experience and obtain a deeper understanding. In one notebook from 1862 Nietzsche credited music for reproducing "...the unceasing impression of demonic Nature," and a few lines later hypothesized that "other senses therefore create similar impressions." As an example he put forward the poems of Hölderlin, a poet whose works frequently appear on Nietzsche's reading lists.²¹ Nietzsche's naturalism and growing transcendentalism at this time closely relates to the works of Hölderlin, and similarities can be seen both in the aesthetic approach and the subject matter. Nietzsche praised his poems for their ability to "raise(s) us up to the purest ideal spheres,"²² and in an inventory of his library in 1861, Nietzsche listed not only works of Hölderlin, but those of Byron as well. The transcendental nature of both of these authors is echoed in Nietzsche's own appreciation for the natural. In many ways, Nietzsche's appreciation of Byron and Hölderlin was perfectly in keeping with the romantic ideals of his day. Perhaps most interesting and enlightening are the ways in which Nietzsche sought to temper these romantic tendencies by appealing to definite truths. In this regard, Nietzsche's ideas resembled Schopenhauer's, even though he would not be exposed to the latter's works until November 1865. Rather than accepting a completely subjective theory of knowledge, he insisted that the truth to be found through transcendental aesthetic experiences was an objective and accessible to all. Its medium might differ from person to person, but its substance remained the same, as did its resultant effect on the truth-seeker.

²⁰ For example, "Der Frühling," HK I, 421.

²¹ HK II, 89.

²² Middleton, 5.

On this point Nietzsche remained adamant, and from it came his insistence on aesthetic integrity. Just as music could communicate metaphysical truths to a listener, it could also distract or confuse a listener if created by an unscrupulous musician. This is supported by his frequent references to Schiller and the poet's heroic admonitions to the German people.²³ Nietzsche praised Schiller most highly for the truthfulness and honor that he inspired in his reader, rather than for the quality of his poetry or prose. This praise relates most likely to Schiller's essays, "On the Aesthetic Education of Man" and "On the Sublime."²⁴ Maintaining this integrity, however, meant rejecting the extravagance and exaggeration of romanticism. In this regard, the inclusion of recitative in oratorio necessitated certain reforms. The restrictions on the musical component did not allow for truly authentic and spontaneous musical expression, and the text was unnecessarily manipulated. The result was a highly artificial construction that failed to do justice to text *or* music. It is interesting to note that Wagner had made similar claims in his *Oper und Drama*. The 1851 printing of this work totaled only five hundred copies, however, and Nietzsche did not come into contact with it until after the second printing in 1868. Ironically, the vehemently conservative Nietzsche had independently reached the same conclusion as the proponent of *Zukunftsmusik*, Richard Wagner.

The evidence gleaned from the early correspondences and notebooks reveals a young Nietzsche with an aesthetic that closely resembles that found in his later works. Importantly, these principles were reached without the aid of Wagner or Schopenhauer, as Nietzsche's first significant exposure to the two did not occur until the mid 1860s.

²³ HK I, 346; HK I, 186-88.

²⁴ Friedrich Schiller, "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man," transl. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, "On the Sublime," transl. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, in *Friedrich Schiller: Essays*, (New York: Continuum, 1993).

This fact goes a long way to discounting a theory that habitually appears in almost any Nietzsche discussion—the reason for his break with Wagner. As the details of their relationship will be discussed at length later, a brief summary will suffice at this juncture. As his appreciation for Wagner’s music increased, Nietzsche was able to meet Wagner personally in 1868, at which time the two began their stormy friendship. For the next five years, Nietzsche was a regular guest at the Wagner household, and became one of his most avid supporters. Through the mid 1870’s their friendship began to wane, and finally the two made a decisive break in 1876. For the rest of his life, Nietzsche was one of Wagner’s harshest critics and published several scathing attacks on Wagner and his music. Many scholars have attributed the break to personal differences stemming from their unhealthy psychological relationship. From this evaluation, it follows that Nietzsche’s later attacks on Wagner were motivated primarily by resentment and anger. If this were the case, then it also follows that the integrity of Nietzsche’s philosophy is in question anytime it ventures into Wagnerian topics. It then becomes difficult to dismiss the intellectual quality of his music-related writings without casting aspersions on his philosophy as a whole, especially given the organic nature of his philosophical project.

Therefore, glimpses of Nietzsche’s “post-Wagnerian” views in his pre-Wagnerian writings provide crucial evidence in defense of his intellectual integrity. His early works also include clues as to the intellectual differences that may have contributed to his eventual split with Wagner. In this setting, Nietzsche’s music provides especially important insight into his aesthetic ideas. His teenage fixation on music leading mankind to greatness and allowing individuals to experience life on a deeper level foreshadows his later attacks on Wagner in which he accuses him of lying and misleading his followers.

By realizing the important role truth played in music throughout Nietzsche's life, the impression of Nietzsche as adoring fan and jilted friend can be replaced with one of a great thinker who outgrew his intellectual forefathers. This conception is reinforced in Nietzsche's later reflections. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche reviews his books and discusses the influences operating on each work. When discussing Wagner, Nietzsche reflects on the refinement of his own taste engendered by their relationship. Their similarities brought them together, but as Nietzsche's mature philosophy came into sharper focus, the ideological gap between the two widened. Nietzsche was in fact appreciative of his friendship with Wagner, pointing to the benefits of becoming enveloped in romanticism and later escaping its clutches. By coming face to face with an icon of romanticism, Nietzsche could see the movement for all it was, realize its potential danger to German culture, and then more effectively counteract its causes and symptoms.