

## Chapter 4

### New Ideas and Genres

“Giving style to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is exercised by those who see all the strengths and weaknesses of their own natures and then comprehend them in an artistic plan until everything appears as art and reason and even weakness delights the eye.”<sup>1</sup>

It was not long after his Wagnerian experimentation, in the vicinity of spring 1862, that two immensely important developments began. First, Nietzsche began in earnest to map out a musical aesthetic, and secondly, after finally abandoning his Christmas oratorio, he began to focus on short piano works and lieder. These developments led directly to his highest musical and philosophical achievements, and were engendered by his participation in Germania. The frequent discussions and arguments resulting from Krug’s Wagnerism and Nietzsche’s conservatism inevitably led the ever-*fleißig* scholars to put forward their views in essays. At one point, Nietzsche lobbied, unsuccessfully, to make “On the Nature of Music” a required topic for a month’s submissions. Notes for his entry survive, and provide valuable insight into his thinking during this time. Personally touched by both the mathematical, formal aspects of music as well as the emotive power, he sought to explain music’s dual nature. Socratically addressing a doubter, Nietzsche explains,

If you smile at the idea that within *form* lives the culmination of the music... others shake their heads as you stand there, despite your intellect, struck dumb by the power of the music before the passionate waves of *Tristan und Isolde*. Both Albrechtsberger’s contrapuntal fugues and Wagner’s love scenes typify music, they must jointly contribute to the essence of it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GS, 232: IV, 290.

<sup>2</sup> HK II, 114.

It is apparent in this quote, that through his exposure to Wagner's music and theories, he had come face to face with music's potential for brute emotional force.

The motivation behind revealing music's true nature remained centered on its communicative capabilities. Nietzsche's belief in the naturalistic, transcendental qualities of music and its ability to express fundamental realities did not change throughout his life. From his earliest notebooks to his final published work, music plays an integral role in supplying truth and enabling individuals to rise above the follies of their age. His move towards a more even split between emotion-centered music and form and structure-centered music reflected his growing understanding of and exposure to different kinds of music. In the same pursuit, Nietzsche marshaled the sciences of linguistics and philology to better understand music. From an early age Nietzsche showed signs of extraordinary linguistic abilities. By the time he was studying in Pforta, he quickly distinguished himself in his Greek and Latin classes and began studying French and Italian as well. His collected notebooks from this time reflect his interest in ancient Greek and Scandinavian literature. From his detailed study of languages, he began to assemble a theory of linguistic/musical development. From further notes for his unfinished "On the Nature of Music" essay, the seeds of this theory—a theory that would find fruition in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* eight years later—can be examined. He was especially fascinated with the inclusion of tone and pitch in language. In a largely unsubstantiated but highly interesting hypothesis, Nietzsche proposes "Through linguistics we find that the older a language is, the richer in tone it is; in fact,

one cannot distinguish between speech and song.”<sup>3</sup> He goes on to explain that these proto-languages supplemented their small vocabulary with inflection and tonal variety to communicate passions, needs and feelings. He then traces the gradual refinement of vocabulary and grammar and links it to the objectification of experience. The more effectively language could quantify and qualify reality, the more its signs became confused for that which was signified and the more “tone was separated from words.”<sup>4</sup> This contributed to the decline in understanding of true reality. We began to think that our language of precise concepts and black and white distinctions accurately reflected that which we described. It was, therefore, only through a return to music, the ultimate proto-language, that we could again express the chaos that truly surrounded us.

Therefore it is not surprising that for this marriage of expressive capabilities with formal and structural integrity Nietzsche looked to ancient Greece. Throughout his life, Nietzsche held the ancient Greeks in the highest esteem and particularly admired their aesthetic endeavors. In a letter to a friend in 1861, Nietzsche defends his “favorite poet,” Hölderlin<sup>5</sup>, and attributes his greatness to his adherence to Greek ideals. He calls Hölderlin’s *Empedocles*, “...this most important dramatic fragment, in whose melancholy tones reverberates the future of the unhappy poet, his grave of long madness, and not as you say in unclear talk but in the purest Sophoclean language and with an inexhaustible fullness of profound ideas.”<sup>6</sup> And later in the same letter: “But nowhere has the longing

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Hölderlin’s ties to Greek literature were furthered by his extensive translations of Greek poetry. When Nietzsche felt it necessary to defend the poet, he was primarily known for his translations, and it would not be until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that his poetry gained wide-spread acceptance.

<sup>6</sup> Middleton, 5-6.

for Greece been revealed in purer tones; nowhere, either is the kinship of soul between Hölderlin, Schiller, and Hegel, his close friend, more plain to see.” In this latter quote, Nietzsche’s association of Greek classicism with German literary classicism comes into plain view and highlights an important association that extends throughout his work.

Although musicians associate the term “classicism” with the music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and other composers of the same time period, Nietzsche uses the term in the literary and historical sense, referring to ancient Greece and Rome. Therefore his use of the term “classical” to describe aesthetic ideas should not be confused with the narrower concepts of the eighteenth century musical period.

The second shift in Nietzsche’s thinking at this time involved his adoption of new musical genres. Instead of writing large-scale works, such as his Christmas oratorio, he began writing short piano pieces and simple lieder. The reasons behind this change were most likely pragmatic. His oratorio submissions to Germania were never fully completed, and Nietzsche - more than Krug or Pinder - took the submission requirements very seriously. Composing works for one or two instruments did not require the orchestral scoring for which the larger forms called, a skill in which he had little or no experience. Furthermore, the feedback he had received from his fellow members surely highlighted the disorganization and formlessness of his previous submissions. Those excerpts in which he had excelled displayed his melodic gifts and charming use of harmonies—skills that could be used most effectively in lieder and piano character pieces. Krug had remarked on Nietzsche’s contrapuntal characteristics and warned him

not to “...make too much of a dry impression.”<sup>7</sup> In the same letter he had praised certain sections of Nietzsche’s music and implied that many of these, if given his complete attention, would be quite beautiful. Nietzsche seems to have taken this to heart, and dedicated his time to small pieces that could be finished and polished rather than long, epic works that never managed to progress beyond rough outlines.

It can also be assumed that his aesthetic theorizing had brought to light the inconsistencies between a Biblical oratorio and his own views on music’s inherently subjective and fleeting nature. If music, at its best, accurately expresses the chaotic and highly unique circumstances experienced by an individual, then the entire concept of an oratorio seems riddled with contradictions. How can one composer accurately reflect the experiences of several characters without misrepresenting all but one. Justifying the use of a chorus as mere orchestration of music felt by an individual only serves to again highlight Nietzsche’s orchestrational weaknesses, and even if valid, was technically unfeasible. The use of a biblical text negates any first-person expression, and limits the composer to speaking through pre-existing characters. Although Nietzsche took advantage of this circumstance in his *Mariensverkündigung*, the overall concept was far too artificial to find agreement with Nietzsche’s now refined aesthetic principles.

Through his lieder and piano works however, Nietzsche was able to create music of a far more expressive and authentic quality. His first fully completed lied was *Mein Platz vor der Tür*, finished in the fall of 1861 and first published in the 1924 collection of Nietzsche lieder by Göhler<sup>8</sup>. Musically, this song marks the beginning of his mature style

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<sup>7</sup> HKB I, 369.

<sup>8</sup> See p. 19 and corresponding footnote for information on the Göhler collection.

and the first valid contribution to the musical world. It also represents a distinct break with both his contrapuntal, neo-Baroque writings and his Wagnerian experiments. Instead of the frequent chromaticism and omnipresent diminished and augmented chords found in his later oratorio movements, *Mein Platz* begins with harmonies reminiscent of Schubert lieder (ex. 13). Aside from a few passing chords inserted for color, it is primarily diatonic. In fact, the difference from his earlier pieces (some written only the month before) is remarkable. This sudden change in harmonic usage presents an excellent example of Nietzsche's tendency to quickly embrace a new idea, experiment with it, and then move on, synthesizing particular components he finds useful. Janz and Love both comment on this tendency,<sup>9</sup> and it is especially applicable to his musical works.

Given the new genres in which he was writing, it is natural that there should be some formal experimentation. Many subtle (and several not so subtle) changes to the standard forms used in lieder and short piano character pieces can be found throughout Nietzsche's music from this time. The form of *Mein Platz* most closely resembles rounded binary form, although significant departures from aspects traditionally associated with the form make its application here questionable. It begins with an eight-bar phrase comprised of two near repetitions of a four-bar melody. Another eight-bar phrase follows and begins in the relative minor (e). After reaching a cadence on the dominant, the original melody returns and an authentic cadence ends the section. This opening section is remarkable for its adherence to late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century

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<sup>9</sup> MN, 329.

forms and harmonies. It could easily be mistaken for an early Schubert lied and possesses a charm and grace not found in Nietzsche's earlier works.

It is not until the B section begins that Nietzsche's individualism asserts itself in the form of several unexpected harmonic shifts (ex. 14). The F naturals suggest a move to C major, representing a somewhat unusual move to the subdominant rather than the dominant. This evaluation, however, is put in doubt the next measure when a passing chord resolves to E major. In a clever harmonic move, Nietzsche reveals the E major chord to have been an applied dominant of A minor, the relative minor of C major, and further reinforces this relationship by writing a descending line ending on a held unison C. Expecting the predictable return to G in the last half of the B section, Nietzsche surprises his listeners with a highly chromatic adagio section beginning in G minor. After several unexpected harmonies, enharmonic shifts and a series of applied dominants, a D<sup>7</sup> chord appears suddenly on the antepenultimate word (ex. 15), establishing a perfect authentic cadence to end the vocal line. The inclusion of a trill on the leading tone in both the vocal and piano part creates the sensation of having just heard a cadenza, a feeling reinforced by the improvisatory atmosphere resulting from its harmonic instability.

The final five measures, instead of reaffirming the original tonality and predictably concluding the piece, present a considerable interpretive and evaluative challenge to the listener. Nietzsche calls for the ending to be played "presto" and ceases to write within the time signature, indicating (it can be assumed) a rhythmically free interpretation. The unison line differs little from the opening phrase except for the substitution of sixteenths for the original eighths in the pick up notes. The adoption of

opening material for use in a conclusion is hardly unusual, but here Nietzsche only adopts *half* of the phrase and therefore ends on the dominant. The uncertainty of this ending is emphasized by the marking of “pianississimo.” Nietzsche’s intentions in writing this unusual ending are entirely left to the listener as no documents exist that might explain his strange choice. It is inconceivable that he merely forgot in which key the piece began—his circuitous harmonic journey through the “cadenza” could not have *accidentally* led back to G major—rather it is indicative of a conscious choice to return to the tonic. It is also illogical to wonder if Nietzsche *knew* pieces generally began and ended in the same key—his training and exposure to music would have surely taught him that. The only choice left us is that he *chose* to abandon the tonic and end the piece with an impression of uncertainty.

The text of the song presents a logical point of departure, but on first glance, the text of this piece does not lend itself to such an ending.

The path along our fence, how wonderful it was.  
I’d go there every morning up to my knees in the grass  
and play there till dusk in the stones and the sand;  
in the evening Grandad would come to fetch me  
and lead me home by the hand.

Then I wished that I were bigger and could see over the fence.  
Grandad would say: “Don’t worry! You’ll see it soon enough!”  
And so I did: I’ve seen the world outside – it wasn’t half so fair  
as the world at my door was then.<sup>10</sup>

The poem itself has a pleasing symmetry in which the opening description of the fence is recalled in the final line. The development occurs in the grandfather’s advice to enjoy life now and not be too quick to enter adulthood. Nietzsche embellishes the line by

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<sup>10</sup> Transl. by Stewart Spencer, Liner notes for *Friedrich Nietzsche: Lieder, Piano Works, Melodrama*, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Aribert Reimann and Elmar Budde, Philips 426 863-2.

setting it to the adagio section that is ripe with unusual harmonies and minor tonalities. Specific emphasis is given to the line “Let it be!” through three held notes in octave doublings. Through the distinct change in mood present in the adagio section, Nietzsche distinguishes between the narrator and the grandfather. In light of this interpretation, it follows that the grandfather’s words and the adult reality they reflect had an effect on the narrator, making a simple, happy ending impossible. A rhetorical explanation, such as this, seems especially appropriate considering both the simple form and short length involved, and Nietzsche’s belief in music’s communicative purpose. The unusual ending of *Mein Platz* serves to indicate the depth of impact this recollection possesses.

The text for this work comes from Klaus Groth, a poet and amateur anthropologist who edited and compiled old German folksongs. Nietzsche ultimately set three of them to music, composing *So lach doch mal* and *Da geht ein Bach* the next summer (1862). Although formal experimentation is also found in these pieces, an image of Nietzsche’s individual characteristics begins to come into focus. All three pieces begin with two phrases, each consisting of eight or twelve measures and each ending with an obvious cadence. Next comes a return to the first section, albeit frequently altered or juxtaposed with other material. For example, in *Mein Platz*, the left hand is embellished, and in *So lach doch mal*, the return to the A material is varied with the insertion of a descant (ex. 16). What follows can best be described as a mini-development in which different tonalities are explored and there is a great deal more metric freedom. In *Da geht ein Bach*, the development section comprises the entirety of an unusually long first ending,<sup>11</sup> and culminates in a gradually shifting harmony suspended over a six measure pedal point.

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<sup>11</sup> Of 28 total measures (not counting the repeat) ten of them are in the first ending; MN, 13.

After the development follows a brief return to the opening material, although it is usually truncated and sometimes interspersed with later material.

The foreshortened “recapitulation” (if the author may use that term somewhat out of context) leads to a conclusion that can vary widely, depending on the spirit of the piece.

In the previously discussed *Mein Platz*, this dictated a conclusion in an indistinct tonality due to the transformative nature of the piece’s spirit. Nietzsche frequently uses the term “Geist” when describing music (translated here as “spirit”). In reference to his music, it describes the essence of the moment, the content of the specific experience, and the part that moment played in the individual’s growth as an entity. In as much as *Mein Platz* describes an awakening to the harsh reality of the world, Nietzsche rhetorically ends the piece differently than it began. In *So lach doch mal*, the piece begins and ends in the same key, and although the above formal structure still applies, its mini-development is much smaller. The text for the piece (he did not set this text to music, the piece merely shares the same title as the Groth poem) mirrors the static formal nature:

Would that I could move my heart;  
 And laugh just once! Feel joy just once!  
 Already the lark strikes out at the heavens,  
 And the nightingale comes out in the wood,  
 At what do you stare in the evening gloom?  
 The flowers smell sweet in the grass, the birds sing overhead,  
 Yet you stay still and pale.

The sadness of the opening lines is only deepened by comparison to the beauty of nature, and the poem—like the piece—fails to lift itself out of the gloom.

Although originating with the Groth lieder, Nietzsche used this form for virtually all of his lieder, to great effect. While on first hearing they may resemble Schubert lieder with Mahler-esque conclusions, upon closer scrutiny a unique, coherent, and individual musical style emerges. They are works that take us inside the moment; taking the original text as a point of departure and then further plumbing the depths of its meaning. It was this richness and insight that led Dieskau to record the works and praise their composer. It is that same insight that makes these pieces worthwhile today and justifies the effort required to rediscover Nietzsche's lieder repertoire. For those interested in performing his songs, appendix A lists all his completed works. In addition to the above-mentioned songs, *Aus der Jugendzeit*, *Beschwörung*, *Ständchen* and *Es winkt und neigt sich* are also effective and charming works in the same vein.

The three Groth texts come from his compilation, *Quickbornlieder*, a collection of folksongs gathered by Groth in the mid 1800's. This work, originally published in the *niederdeutsch* or "low German" typical of peasant folksongs, was later translated into the more accessible *hochdeutsch* or "high German" in 1856 by A. von Winterfeld. Nietzsche chose the high German translation, somewhat sacrificing historical authenticity but compensating in clarity. He thought very highly of Groth's collection, as his quest to set them to music attests. In one of his notebooks from 1858, Nietzsche lists *Quickbornlieder* right next to the *Frithjofssage*, the *Cid*, *Nibelungen*, and the works of Münchhausen as some of his most important books.<sup>12</sup> His acclaim for these books place him in the middle of a literary movement called "National Romanticism" in which Wagner was also very involved. Proponents of national romanticism sought to revive

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<sup>12</sup> HK I, 400.

historical literary works and paint them in a nationalistic light. The *Frithjofssage* (or Frithiof's Saga as it is usually translated) is an Icelandic example of this. Rediscovered by Bishop Esaias Tegnér, the story tells of Frithiof, a son of a commoner, who falls in love with and betroths an Icelandic princess. After the tragic death of several benevolent patriarchs, power falls on Frithiof's evil brothers who, jealous of their brother, exile him to the high seas. The adventures that follow make up the bulk of the story and include stories typical of mythical epics. What makes the collection an example of national romanticism instead of literary archaeology is Tegnér's treatment of the story. The brutality and pitiless ambition of the characters is glossed over and replaced with Victorian notions of nobility and chivalry. Twelfth-century characters with no conception of a nation state improbably give rousing, nationalistic speeches glorifying sacrifice for the state. Most characteristically, specific virtues inherent in the characters were attributed to a corresponding "national character" and served to promote the virulent racial theories that permeated the late nineteenth century.

In many ways these racial theories—along with national romanticism—were two facets of the same philosophy that swept through western Europe after the revolutions of 1848. As a bright young German in an elite boarding school, Nietzsche was surely caught up in them, as his earliest philosophical works show. His use of Friedrich Rückert's text in *Aus der Jugendzeit* attests to his familiarity with and appreciation of another author associated with nationalist ideologies.<sup>13</sup> Although *Aus der Jugendzeit* comes from an early collection (*Italienische Gedichte*), Nietzsche was no doubt familiar

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<sup>13</sup> In setting Rückert's texts to music, Nietzsche followed in the footsteps of Robert and Clara Schumann who had set several of his characteristically pastoral poems little over a decade earlier. He also anticipated Mahler's "Vier Lieder nach Friedrich Rückert" and the famous "Kindertotenlieder."

with his patriotic and anti-French *Geharnischte Sonette* or “sonnets in armor.” In fact, it would not be until much later that he freed himself of the last vestiges of nationalism. In the meantime, his fascination with the Norse epics and German folk songs were yet another interest he unknowingly shared with Richard Wagner. Wagner’s interest in Norse mythology is well-documented, and his firm belief in the corresponding nationalism and race theories of his day are also well documented in both his “Oper und Drama” and “An der Juden.” Although Nietzsche’s own interest in Münchhausen and the Frithiof’s Saga clearly predate any knowledge of Wagner’s studies,<sup>14</sup> the initial appearance of Groth’s texts shortly after reading through *Tristan und Isolde* points to a Wagnerian influence. If nothing else, Nietzsche’s eyes were opened to the possibility of uniting ancient literature with music, the most ancient of languages

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<sup>14</sup> His list of epics and folksongs dates from 1859, and his first documented exposure to *Die Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* – the most likely source from which Nietzsche learned of Wagner’s studies - is not until 1861.