Not a “Telephone to the Beyond”:
Nietzsche’s Early Writings on Music

KATHERINE FRY

Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geist der Musik* (The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music), published at the beginning of 1872, stands as an important contribution to aesthetic debates about music’s relationship with language and culture in late-nineteenth-century Europe. Dating from the years of his close friendship with Wagner, Nietzsche’s first book was explicitly indebted to the composer’s aesthetics of musical transcendence as depicted primarily in his “Beethoven” essay of 1870, and to Schopenhauer’s elevation of music as an independent medium of metaphysical depths in his *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (The World as Will and Representation, 1819).1 Going beyond these immediate influences, commentators on German aesthetics have interpreted Nietzsche’s early philosophy of music as derivative of a more general tendency for Romantic writers after Kant—such as E. T. A. Hoffmann, Wilhelm Wackenroder, and Friedrich Schelling—to eulogize music as a revelation of the ineffable

---

Absolute. Meanwhile, and from the standpoint of French and American deconstruction, Paul De Man, Sarah Kofman, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Henry Staten debated Nietzsche’s theories of language and music according to how far they reflected the “metaphysics of presence” that Jacques Derrida memorably associated with philosophy in the “Epoch of Rousseau.”

Philosophical discussions of this kind have provided invaluable insights into Nietzsche’s relationship with Romantic aesthetics, showing the relevance of his concept of music more generally for larger problems of language, epistemology, and subjectivity. Yet such over-arching perspectives also tend to view his concept of music through larger paradigms such as “absolute” music or the history of “metaphysics,” thus detracting from both the more localized conditions under which his texts were produced and the particular development of his musical aesthetics within and beyond his first book.

Although Nietzsche’s early philosophy of music certainly reflects his nuanced critical engagement with Kantian idealism, and with Schopenhauer’s metaphysics in particular, he intended The Birth of Tragedy as both a major contribution to classical philology and a tribute to Wagner’s role in the renewal of German culture. With its combination of historical scholarship, aesthetic theory, and cultural propaganda, this was a highly unusual and provocative first book for a scholar of classical languages and literature. Many of his academic colleagues derided the work, and Nietzsche would become increasingly preoccupied with matters of a more direct philosophical nature in most of his subsequent writings. Yet he clearly saw his role as a philologist and historian extending beyond an isolated study of the past to encompass a critique of culture in the present. If his central aesthetic theory of Dionsyan and Apolline artistic drives constituted the point of departure for his investigation into the aesthetics of Greek tragedy, this inquiry was allied with his diagnosis of decline in modernity and utopian vision of rebirth through contemporary art, and music in particular.

It is well known that Nietzsche would later reverse his position on modern musical culture, becoming notoriously outspoken against Wagner and Schopenhauer from the period of Menschliches, Allzumenschliches (Human, All Too Human, 1878) onwards. In a new preface to the second edition of The Birth of Tragedy, “Versuch einer Selbst-Kritik” [Attempt at Self-Criticism], he lamented that he had spoiled his original perception of Greek culture, and Dionsyan tragedy in particular, through a conflataion with idealist metaphysics and Wagnerian music drama. In the context of his mature critique of modernity in the late 1880s, he rejected Wagner’s Parsifal, and Romantic meta-

---


physics of musical transcendence more generally, as extensions of religious asceticism:

All at once, [Wagner] grasped that with Schopenhauer's theory and innovation more could be done in majorem musicae gloriam, —in fact, with the sovereignty of music as Schopenhauer understood it: music set apart from all the other arts, the inherently independent art, not providing reflections on the phenomenal world like the other arts, but instead, speaking the language of the will itself straight out of the “abyss,” as the latter’s most unique, original, direct revelation. With this extraordinary increase in the value placed on music, which seemed to stem from Schopenhauer’s philosophy, the musician himself suddenly had an unprecedented rise in price: from now on he became an oracle, a priest, in fact, more than a priest, a sort of mouthpiece of the “in itself” of things, a telephone to the beyond [ein Telephon des Jenseits].

Juxtaposing theological and technological imagery, the later Nietzsche undermines Schopenhauer’s intellectual authority in late-nineteenth-century culture, and debunks Romantic ideas of music as expressive of a metaphysical “beyond.” But whereas it is common to associate Nietzsche’s radical skepticism toward Romantic aesthetics of music with his post-Wagnerian outlook on musical culture, his early writings from the 1870s already suggest areas of continuity with his later, anti-metaphysical outlook on music. Moreover, and as I shall explore in what follows, these writings articulate a critical conflict between music as actual compositional practice and as a more abstract philosophical ideal, a conflict that remains pertinent to issues of musical meaning in today’s musicology.

Whereas histories of nineteenth-century German music aesthetics have traditionally emphasized the dominance of Romantic and formalist notions of transcendence and autonomy, scholars such as Emily Dolan, Gundula Kreuzer, and David Trippett have more recently foregrounded music’s relationship with technological mediation, acoustic theory, and scientific materialism. Returning to the story of the rise in aesthetic value of instrumental music in the years “around 1800,” Dolan criticizes previous histories for their over-reliance on philosophical discourse. “The emphasis on philosophies that prize the abstract,” she argues, “ignores the materiality of musical practice and risks undervaluing the history of listening.” More than this, the tendency to attribute music-historical changes to intellectual developments taking place at the level of Romantic rhetoric—such as the rise of idealism, the origins of “absolute” music, or the emergence of the work concept—inadvertently reinforces the idea of “great works” as transcendent aesthetic objects abstracted from material contexts of performance and reproduction.

Dolan advocates a turn to empirical conditions and technologies as a way to unmask ideologies of music as an abstract ideal, revealing the conditions that engender music in its sounding reality. Yet she also qualifies her narrative by intimating the consequences of subsuming music too straightforwardly within empirical and technological conditions. She asserts that “to study instruments in this period is to do more than offer musicology a suitable replacement for the aesthetic. Rather it offers a way of breaking down unhelpful dichotomies between art and machine.” Dolan is specifi-

---


8In this respect, my exegesis builds on Stefan Lorenz Sorgner’s introductory account of music in Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy, which focuses on his divergence from Schopenhauer as reflected in this text but without reference to the other writings. See “Nietzsche,” in Music in German Philosophy, ed. Stefan Lorenz Sorgner and Oliver Fürbeth, trans. Susan H. Gillespie [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010], 141–64. My historical focus also complements and contrasts with Andrew Bowie’s more general philosophical discussion of Nietzsche’s music aesthetics in relation to wider nineteenth-century theories of art and subjectivity. See “Nietzsche and the Fate of Romantic Thought,” 275–311.


10Dolan, The Orchestral Revolution, 5.

11Ibid., 19.
century music} naturally concerned with recapturing an earlier association of aesthetics with sensuous knowledge, an association that she sees as chronologically appropriate to musical practice and ideas in the late eighteenth century, and as an alternative to Kant’s notion of disinterested aesthetic judgment in particular. In this way, her emphasis on orchestral performance and mediation is representative of a broader trend in musicology to rethink the scope of the aesthetic, and to address what it means to study and write about musical experience beyond either musical formalism or a narrowly conceived focus on musical scores as carriers of social meaning.

On the one hand, then, a turn to materiality and auditory cultures appears to suggest resistance to philosophical discourse about music as somehow removed from the “real” conditions of music as sonorous presence. On the other, scholarly interest in musical performance, embodiment, and listening has coincided with a parallel impulse to revisit the history of aesthetics, and to consider more closely the distinctive and varied ways in which music has persistently occupied a critical space within philosophical thought.

Recent interest in what Martin Scherzinger has termed philosophy’s “sonotropism” has centered particularly on the inheritance and transformation of nineteenth-century music aesthetics in the antimetaphysical writings of contemporary European thinkers: from Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and Martin Heidegger to Vladimir Jankélévitch and Gilles Deleuze, among others. Admittedly, Adorno’s extensive writings on music and culture have long stood as productive sources of inspiration and contention within academic music studies. Yet recent work has explored a broader history of philosophical debate about music, helping to open up fresh directions for scholars concerned with fundamental questions about the particularity of music’s meaning and value.

The recuperation of Jankélévitch’s philosophy in musicological discourse following Carolyn Abbate’s translation of La musique et l’ineffable [Music and the Ineffable, 1961] stands as a case in point. Abbate took inspiration from Jankélévitch’s argument that music exists as acoustic materiality, as lived experience unfolding in time, in order to raise the problem of music’s unique ephemeral character. Jankélévitch’s insistence on music’s ineffability as performance—she argued—remains relevant for musicology in the twenty-first century, insofar as his philosophy “dismantles the claims of musical semantics and exposes the suspect metaphorical urge that underlies musical hermeneutics, leading him to the conclusion that musical works are not an argument, they cannot be ‘followed’ except by false analogy.”

Building on this intervention, Michael Gallope has lately explored further Jankélévitch’s claims about music’s resistance to conceptual reasoning as representative of an enduring philosophical fascination with music as a locus of critical and ethical potential. Gallope portrays Jankélévitch less as an isolated French intellectual resolutely opposed to an Austro-German musical and philosophical tradition, and more as analogous to other contemporary figures affiliated with post-structuralism and the Frankfurt School. Through a comparative reading of Adorno, Bloch, Jankélévitch, Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, he shows how these writers deferred in very different ways to music’s semantic elusiveness as a way to destabilize metaphysics, at the same time

\[12\] Ibid., 22.
\[13\] Martin Scherzinger, “Introduction: On Sonotropism,” Contemporary Music Review 31:5–6 (2012): 345–52. Of course, academic philosophers have also sought to enlarge the parameters of the philosophy and aesthetics of music within and beyond the analytical tradition. Andrew Bowie’s Music, Philosophy and Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) explores how philosophers from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century approached the idea of music as a source of inspiration for questions about subjectivity, language, ethics, and metaphysics. Bowie distinguishes his approach from musicology insofar as he remains primarily interested in how conceptions of music from within the continental philosophical tradition can be harnessed to interrogate methods and approaches in present-day academic philosophy.

that they advanced concrete philosophies of modern music.\textsuperscript{16}

Against this backdrop of renewed interest in material culture and contemporary philosophy, it might seem in some ways counterintuitive to return to the high Romanticism of Nietzsche’s early writings on music. After all, he memorably theorized music at key points in \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} and other writings in abstract metaphysical terms, and utilized his concept of Dionysian art to proclaim the superiority of German music and culture in explicit celebration of national unification. Without denying the ideology of Nietzsche’s initial Romanticism and defence of Wagner, however, the following analysis focuses on the gradual emergence of his critical outlook on metaphysics and defence of Wagner, however, the following analysis focuses on the gradual emergence of his critical outlook on metaphysical aesthetics and the musical culture of his time, from the period of the unpublished notebooks contemporary with \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} to the publication of the first volume of \textit{Human, All Too Human} in 1878.\textsuperscript{17} While Nietzsche’s writings on music from this period cannot be simply recast through reference to “the material,” the particular development of his thinking on music, and the emergence of his critical outlook on metaphysics and Romanticism in the 1870s, holds relevance for debates about the relationship between philosophy and musical practice, and about music’s status as transcendent ideal and as material presence.

Part 1 offers an exegesis of Nietzsche’s early ideas about music’s relationship with language and culture as they depart from Schopenhauer. Part 2 then turns to Nietzsche’s evolving identity as a philosopher and his relationship with contemporary musical life, a relationship that led from his impassioned defence of Wagner in \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} to his explicit rejection of Romantic aesthetics of music as articulated within the first volume of \textit{Human, All Too Human}. This section explores how Nietzsche’s participation in the Bayreuth undertaking and his exposure to music-making in 1870s Germany led not only to his altered stance on Wagner, but to a revised aesthetics of music in historicist and naturalistic terms. In \textit{Human, All Too Human} Nietzsche will interpret music’s capacity for independent expression as something unique to recent times, the product of a residual association of instrumental music with speech. However, and despite his critical project to understand musical expression and listening away from what he sees as the universalizing gestures of Romanticism, he never entirely abandons ideals of musical transcendence as a critical model for his philosophy.

\textbf{Musical Metaphysics contra Schopenhauer}

In an unpublished fragment on the subject of music and poetry, dating from 1871, Nietzsche refutes the idea that music’s value lies in its ability to represent distinct and pre-defined emotions.\textsuperscript{18} In a reversal of Hegel’s placement of poetry above music in the philosophical hierarchy of the arts, Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer in regarding music as capable of independent expression beyond the limits of concepts and images.\textsuperscript{19} His notion that music not only


\textsuperscript{17}Nietzsche’s unpublished philosophical writings from the early 1870s form part of the extensive literary remains \textit{(Nachlaß)} that are available alongside his overall published corpus and form part of the scholarly edition of his works. See \textit{Nachlaß} 1869–1874, in KSA, VII, 7.


\textsuperscript{19}In \textit{The World as Will and Representation}, Schopenhauer evaluated each of the arts according to their capacity to objectify the will. In Schopenhauer’s philosophy, the will describes the realm of irrational energies and drives that he understood as the true reality motivating our everyday lives, emotions and actions—i.e., the world of representation. Whereas Schopenhauer considered the plastic, pictorial and literary arts merely to convey knowledge of the ideas, he considered music the highest of the arts for its capacity to express the will most directly. See \textit{Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung}, vol. 1, \textit{Sämtliche Werke}, vol. 2, ed. Julius Frauenstädt and Arthur Hübscher [Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1949], 251–316; \textit{The World as Will and Representation}, vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne [New York: Dover, 1966], 213–67.
expresses a deeper, more profound content than other art forms but actually gives rise to poetic meaning is one of the central tenets of his early conception of music, providing the touchstone for his descriptions of ancient Greek culture and modern German music within and beyond *The Birth of Tragedy*. In a notable passage, Nietzsche attributes quasi-spiritual significance to late Beethoven for having revived the “true” capacity of music to speak directly to the imagination without the need for arbitrary symbols:  

In comparison to the supreme revelations of music, we even involuntarily feel the *crudeness* of any use of images and any affect dragged in for the sake of analogy: Beethoven’s last quartets, for example, entirely put to shame any intuitive perception and indeed the whole realm of empirical reality. Faced with the supreme God who really manifests himself, the symbol no longer has any meaning: now it actually appears like an offensive superficiality.  

Nietzsche substantiates his belief in music’s expressive primacy and powers of enchantment through recourse to a Romantic theory of language as originating in the musicality of speech and song. He claims that the union of sound, image and concept in vocal music is universal and exists at the origin of music, while “absolute” music is unique to modern times: “the music of every people begins in close alliance with lyric poetry, and long before there can be any thought of an absolute music it undergoes the most important stages of development in that combination.” Nietzsche suggests that this union of music and words in ancient lyric is prefigured in nature; it reflects a “*duality in the essence of language,*” which represents the “original model of that combination of music and poetry.” He goes on to describe the choral movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as a recuperation of this natural union between words and music, one that appeals to the “*convincing sound of the human voice*” above the intelligibility of words. The Ninth Symphony, he argues, achieves an authentic evocation of the Dionysian lyric, which disregards the listener’s need for rational understanding. Through the example of this work, he justifies a conception of the word-music relation as governed by the primacy of the sonorous voice as a profound source of subjective expression over and above the communicative constraints of words.

Given that Nietzsche emphasizes the historical and linguistic primacy of voiced expression and sung poetry, it would be misleading to read his theory of music and words as an argument for “absolute” music—understood in the traditional sense as an aesthetic judgment about the inherent value of instrumental music without words. To a certain extent, his conviction in music’s capacity to reveal a deeper level of content than conceptual language, along with his rhapsodic accounts of Beethoven as expressive of a deep emotional reality, is more in keeping with a broader Romantic philosophical discourse on music as a symbol for various interpretations of the Kantian noumenal. Writing over fifty years on from Schopenhauer and the early Romantics, however, the extent to which Nietzsche merely channeled idealist conceptions of musical transcendence is questionable. The fragment from 1871 reveals his critical engagement with Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of music as an expression of the will. Central to his revision is the notion that there is no

---

20. KSA, VII, 366; EN, 88.
21. KSA, VII, 360; EN, 84.
22. KSA, VII, 360; EN, 84.
23. KSA, VII, 367; EN, 89.
24. Lawrence Kramer suggested that Nietzsche’s description of music and poetry is unthinkable without the example of Beethoven’s Ninth—which is “the most dramatic example of outdoing in all of music because it willfully contends with a significant text.” *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 143. Richard Kurth also discussed Nietzsche’s early fragment in relation to theories of the *Lied*, reading it as an attack on the “*mimetic*” relation between music and poetry—a relation in which music acts as a figurative servant of poetic characters, emotions and events; “*Music and Poetry, a Wilderness of Doubles: Heine-Nietzsche-Schubert-Derrida,*” this journal 21 (1997): 3–37.
complete congruence between Schopenhauer’s concept of “will” and the true essence of things. Verbal language is a form of symbolism that refers not to the essence of phenomena but merely to their conscious and unconscious representation. Nietzsche goes beyond Schopenhauer when he proposes that we can have no direct access to this essence, suggesting that the equation of the noumenal realm with the idea of will is essentially speculative as there can be no bridge connecting us to knowledge of the thing-in-itself. While we cannot access things as they are beyond the world of appearances, he suggests it is possible to distinguish two kinds of representation, both originating within language. An originary level of symbolization is manifest as “sensations of pleasure and displeasure” and relates to all others as an “eternally present ground bass.” Retaining the word “will” to designate this primary form of appearance, the symbolic sphere serves as a fundamental component of language: “all the degrees of pleasure and displeasure—manifestations of one, to us, unfathomable primal source—are symbolized in the tone of the speaker; while all the other representations are indicated by the gestural symbolism of the speaker.”

In formulating the will as manifest within language—as a primary form of appearance (Erscheinungsform)—Nietzsche thus goes beyond Schopenhauer's duality. He does not envisage music as the universal expression of the will as metaphysical presence, but claims instead that “the ‘will’ acquires an increasingly adequate symbolic expression in the course of the development of music.” He arrives at the “aesthetic principle” that “the will is the object of music, but not its origin, that is, the will in its greatest universality, as the most original manifestation by which all becoming must be understood.” It is this revised concept of the will as object of music that underlines Nietzsche’s interpretation of Wagnerian music dramas as a union of Dionysian music and Apolline myth in the concluding argument of The Birth of Tragedy. His famous depiction of the potentially destructive impact of hearing Tristan as a “vast symphonic movement,” as an outpouring of the unconscious will without the assistance of words and images, arguably reflects his earlier insight that music’s potential to adequately represent the will is itself historically synchronous with the increased expressive capacities of modern instrumental music—a point he will develop in a more critical way in his writings on musical expression later in the decade.

Nietzsche’s initial reconception of Schopenhauer’s duality in the 1871 text points toward the more overt critique of language and knowledge that would emerge in the years immediately following The Birth of Tragedy. In another background essay from 1873, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” he abandons Schopenhauer’s concept entirely. (In a notebook entry from early 1873 he records his decision to reject what he now regards as the pitfalls of Schopenhauer’s terminology: “everything must be said as precisely as possible and any technical term, including ‘will,’ must be left on one side.”) In place of Schopenhauer’s concept of will, he now refers simply to an unknown “X” to designate the inaccessibility of the thing-in-itself. Moreover, he employs a sonic metaphor in order to illustrate this incongruence between the linguistic sign and the thing-in-itself, evoking Ernst Chladni’s scientific sound figures.

---

27 KSA, VII, 361; EN, 84. Nietzsche had already arrived at this argument shortly after reading The World as Will and Representation for the first time in 1865. For an overview and bibliography on the question of Nietzsche’s relationship with Schopenhauer in general, see the essays collected in Willingness and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche’s Educator, ed. Christopher Janaway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
28 KSA, VII, 361; EN, 84.
29 KSA, VII, 361; EN, 85.
30 KSA, VII, 362; EN, 85.
31 KSA, VII, 364; EN, 87.
32 KSA, I, 132–40; BT, 98–104. Although Nietzsche largely excludes the concept of “will” from the initial sections describing Greek tragedy, he then refers at some length to Schopenhauer in the sections on Wagner and contemporary culture.
33 KSA, I, 873–90; EN, 253–64.
34 KSA, VII, 434; EN, 108.
35 The German physicist Ernst Chladni (1756–1823) experimented in the 1780s with producing visual sound waves by spreading sand over glass plates. When he stroked a violin bow across the edges of the plates, the vibrations would result in patterned distributions of the sand as wave formations, varying according to the size and shape of the
the inadequacy of language as a true reflection of the world is akin, he suggests, to mistaking visual sound-wave patterns for the sound itself:

Think of a man who is stone deaf and has never felt the sensation of sound and music: imagine how he gazes in astonishment at Chladnî’s sound figures in the sand and, realizing that they are caused by the vibration of the string, swears that he knows what men mean by “sound.” This is the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to language. Just as the sound appears as a sand figure, so the mysterious X of the thing-in-itself appears first as a nerve stimulus, then as an image and finally as a sound. In any case the emergence of language is not a logical affair, and if all the material with which and in which the man of truth, the scientist or the philosopher, later works and builds does not come from cloud-cuckooland, neither does it come from the essence of things.36

Although Nietzsche is not directly concerned with music in this text, he invokes a particular acoustic phenomenon—in this case the relationship between sound production, vibrations, and visual wave patterns—to illustrate a wider philosophical argument about the emergence of language. As Sarah Kofman has noted, the reference to Chladnî operates as a “metaphor for a metaphor.” The sonic image helps Nietzsche describe his theory of language better than through a conceptual schema.37 In this way, he retains an earlier conception of sound as central to the origins of language, only now there is no defined origin, and no causal relationship between different symbolic spheres. Moving away from Schopenhauer in this early fragment still has implications for understanding how Nietzsche thought more widely about music and musical culture in his other writings. On the one hand, his decisive departure from Schopenhauerian vocabulary in favor of a more scientific manner looks ahead to Human, All Too Human, where Nietzsche positions music as contingent on historical and material conditions that determine its production and meaning: just as he portrays words and concepts alienated from any true origin or essence, so he will call into question universalizing conceptions of music as abstracted from the historical nature of musical material and modes of perception.38 On the other hand, it is important to note that Nietzsche composed “On Truth and Lie” only a year after publishing The Birth of Tragedy. Despite its connection to the later works, the essay does not mark a rupture from his first book so much as a development of it, pursuing the implications of a critical engagement with Schopenhauer, and with idealist philosophy more generally.

In the opening sections of The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche presents the contrast between Dionysian and Apolline artistic drives as a “physiological” duality, wherein the Dionysian stands for a mode of symbolization closer to—yet still removed—from an unknowable origin. He affiliates Dionysian expression with “primal unity” (das Ur-Eine), which—although inaccessible to direct representation—achieves its closest manifestation through music.39 Having established the relationship between the Dionysian and Apolline as an aesthetic contrast, he depicts these drives as a historical conflict giving rise to Greek tragedy. Thus the ancient religious worshipers of the cult of Dionysus signified through their collective music making the first significant artistic expression of a heightened state of tragic rapture unfamiliar to the Apolline world of ancient

plate or the distribution and speed of the bow. See Jonathan Sterne, The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 43–45. While Nietzsche’s reference to Chladnî’s scientific sound figures would appear to suggest that he is emphasising the materiality of sound, the reference is directed toward his concerns about language and morality.

On this point see also Bowie, Music, Philosophy and Modernity, 252. I refer to Bowie’s reading of Nietzsche’s aesthetics of music in Human, All Too Human below.

KSA, I, 29–30; BT, 18. The question of how far Nietzsche’s theory of Dionysian and Apolline creative drives departs from Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of will and representation has provoked much discussion in the secondary philosophical literature on The Birth of Tragedy, particularly with regard to the problem of reading the published text in relation to unpublished material from the notebooks. Staten’s “The Birth of Tragedy Reconstructed,” 187–216, provides a wide-ranging discussion of the larger implications of Nietzsche’s departure from Schopenhauer’s metaphysics in the unpublished writings as this pertains to his philosophical vocabulary and ontology in the main text of The Birth of Tragedy.
Greece: “The music of Apollo was Doric architectonics in sound, but only in the kind of hinted-at tones characteristic of the cithara. It keeps at a distance, as something un-Apollonian, the very element which defines the character of Dionysiac music [and thus of music generally]: the power of its sound to shake us to our very foundations, the unified stream of melody and the quite incomparable world of harmony.”

This depiction of the power of sound as the essence of the Dionysian aesthetic experience informs Nietzsche’s various reflections on the genres of poetry, song, and tragic theater. In elaborating on the immersive sonic force of the Dionysian aesthetic experience, however, he then goes on to theorize music in a more general sense as central to his critique of modern “Socratic” culture. On one level, he associates Socrates with the historical decline of tragedy and tragic culture, and with what he sees as the rationalism of Euripidean theater. On another, he regards the figure of Socrates as representing a new set of values affirming moralism, absolute truth, and realism—values largely antithetical to the Dionysian-Apolline polarity on which tragedy was founded. He regards the Socratic optimism that overturned the spirit of Greek tragedy as inaugurating a long process of rationalization that reaches its pinnacle in the scientific positivism and industrialism of the nineteenth century.

Nietzsche would identify his allegorical conflict between Dionysus and Socrates as one of the more important and lasting insights of his book. In the “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” he notes a crucial distinction between his early analysis of Socratism and his later philosophy: namely, the incorporation of Christianity as an explicit component in his critique. In this context, he supplements his earlier position with the claim that both the Socratic conviction in a true world of timeless ideas and the Christian insistence on unconditional moral values are forms of life-negating asceticism: in sustaining the illusion of a higher reality, a supersensible “Beyond” (ein Jenseits), they denigrate the physical, temporal world of the “Here-and-Now” (das Diesseits). In the context of this critique, Nietzsche’s theory of Dionysian art cannot be dissociated from his well-known dictum that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified.”

As Martha Nussbaum has argued in her reading of Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy, Nietzsche does not detach the aesthetic as a privileged realm separate and exempt from the moral and social sphere, but presents us with a view of creativity and the arts understood in the broadest sense as a paradigm for confronting and affirming life. His most fundamental break from Schopenhauer’s philosophy, she argues, lies in “his complete rejection of the normative ethics of pessimism, in favour of a view that urges us to take joy in life, in the body, in becoming—even, and especially, in the face of the recognition that the world is chaotic and cruel.”

In this sense, Nietzsche departs from Schopenhauer’s understanding of aesthetic experience as disinterested contemplation, or as redemption from the everyday world of social experience. Even in the relatively early context of *The Birth of Tragedy*, he regards art as directed toward enhancement and enrichment of individual life and society at large.

Nussbaum develops her interpretation of Nietzsche’s affirmative pessimism through a focus on his theory of Dionysian art and creativity in general, and in particular the aesthetic experience of tragedy and its effect on the spectator. Yet her argument clearly holds

---

40KSA, I, 33; BT, 21.
41KSA, I, 98–102; BT, 72–75. On Nietzsche as a critic of modern rationalization, see for example Jürgen Habermas, “The Entry into Postmodernity: Nietzsche as a Turning Point,” in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 83–105.
42KSA, I, 18; BT, 9.
43KSA, I, 152; BT, 113.
45Nussbaum, “The Transfigurations of Intoxication,” 56.
implications for Nietzsche’s specific evaluation of music. In combining historical reflection on the aesthetics of musical tragedy, alongside a larger philosophical conflict between Dionysian and Socratic tendencies, Nietzsche attributes twofold significance to musical experience. Dionysian music enacts a breakdown of individual subjectivity; it symbolizes the conditions of ephemerality and flux underlying everyday existence and requires the balancing influence of Apolline illusion. At the same time, the idea that music can be communicative through its unique sonorous constituents of melodic line and harmonic tension offers an important correlate to what he sees as a modern dependence on absolute truth or a metaphysical “beyond.” In this respect, Nietzsche’s remarks on music and language take on a broader significance within the context of his critique of Socratic rationalism. He memorably appeals to the example of Socrates’ dream—as depicted in Plato’s Phaedo—in which the philosopher was compelled to compose music.46 Through an image of the “music-making Socrates,” he alludes to the promise of a new method of practicing philosophy, a method of knowing supplemented by music in the spirit of a Dionysian outlook on life.47

This ideal of music’s distinction from language as exemplary of a particular philosophical stance on life complements remarks from Nietzsche’s notebooks regarding the limitations of language as a vehicle of truth: “the philosopher caught in the nets of language,” he noted in 1873.48 Or, as he puts it in another note from the same period: “Music as supplement to language: music reproduces many stimuli, and whole stimulatory conditions, that language cannot represent.”49 With this statement, Nietzsche reiterates his divergence from Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of music by portraying the relationship between music and language not as a duality between essence and appearance, but as a distinction between degrees of symbolization and affect. At the same time, he appears to move further away from his earlier emphasis on music as the natural precursor to language and poetry familiar from the 1871 fragment. Having previously described the music of Beethoven as a sublime revelation of the “superficiality” and “crudeness” of words and images, he now depicts music as a medium capable of supplementing ordinary language through its capacity to create “stimulatory conditions” that would enhance perception.50

In his last writings from the 1880s, Nietzsche will continue to uphold the belief that music has a capacity for meaningful expression beyond words, and that it can provide a vital model for philosophy.51 But if his early aestheticism in The Birth of Tragedy and unpublished writings can be reclaimed to a certain extent as a humanistic statement on the power of artistic creativity, and of music above all, to positively enrich individual existence and society at large, the question remains how his statements on musical value in abstract terms correspond with his experience of music in its sounding reality as actual composition and performance. Nietzsche certainly differs from Schopenhauer in the way that he theorizes aesthetic experience as embodied rather than transcendent, as ethically directed toward worldly concerns about a meaningful life in modern

46KSA, I, 96; BT, 71. See also Plato, Phaedo 60e5, in Complete Works, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
47For a summary account of Nietzsche’s concept of Dionysian music in opposition to Apollo and Socrates, see also Sorgner, “Nietzsche,” in Music in German Philosophy, 141–64. Sorgner reads Nietzsche’s concept of Dionysian music as reflecting a materialist aesthetics that departs unequivocally from Schopenhauer’s metaphysics and philosophy of art. In contrast, I suggest that Nietzsche’s early writings maintain a conflict between idealist metaphysics and a view of music as culturally embedded.
48“Der Philosoph in den Netzen der Sprache eingefangen”; KSA, VII, 463; EN, 133.
49KSA, VII, 465; EN, 135.
50Nietzsche’s emphasis on music’s capacity to re-create “stimulatory conditions” beyond language is ambiguous and anticipates elements of his later ideology critique of Wagner. In his late writings, the idea that music can have a powerful hold over the body is central both to his critical evaluation of Wagnerian music and its persuasive effects on the spectator, and to his continued admiration for music’s potential to inspire in listeners a life-affirming form of Dionysian pessimism [a quality he famously identifies with Bizet’s Carmen]. See Der Fall Wagner, in KSA, VI, 13–19; and Nietzsche contra Wagner, in KSA, VI, 418–20.
51For a larger discussion of the place of music in Nietzsche’s late critique of metaphysics in the 1880s, see Bowie, “Nietzsche and the Fate of Romantic Thought,” 292–311.
society. Yet his ethical aesthetics still depend
on sustaining a utopian view that certain kinds
of music or musical experience are necessarily
resistant or opposed to Socratic reason as the
underlying condition of modernity. As we shall
now see, Nietzsche’s philosophy of music aligns
to a large extent with his experience of con-
temporary German music, and with the ex-
ample of Wagner in particular; yet he quickly
began to reject this close alliance between his
philosophy of art and the contemporary music
of his day. Indeed, his conviction in the phi-
losophical potential of music coincided with the
emergence of a parallel project, beginning in
the mid-1870s, to theorize music’s expressive
capacity in new ways.

Music and the Philosopher of Culture

The concluding argument of The Birth of Trag-
edy famously reflects Nietzsche’s identification
of a resurgent Dionysian impulse in the con-
crete artistic developments taking place in the
musical culture of his day. In projecting a larger
philosophical conflict between modern Socratic
culture and a renewed form of Dionysian rup-
ture, he understands Wagner’s music to hold
the potential to resist the rationalization of art
he saw as detrimental to music in modern soci-
ety. In the period surrounding the gestation
and immediate aftermath of his first book,
Wagner seemed to promise a new form of aes-
thetic experience, pointing not just to alterna-
tive artistic principles and listening habits from
those of conventional opera, but to a revital-
ized culture based on an image of the Greeks. It
is worth remembering, however, that Nietzsche
did not base his claims for the revival of Ger-
man society on his actual experience of
Wagner’s operas in production, but expressed
his hopes for a rebirth of tragedy in anticipa-
tion of a future realization. Indeed, Nietzsche
was no different from other contemporary lis-
teners insofar as full operatic productions were
a rarity; his encounters with Wagner’s works
primarily entailed the domestic performance
and study of piano-vocal scores and libretti,
alongside the experience of selected excerpts in
miscellaneous concerts. Although he portrayed
Tristan und Isolde as a revival of the multisens-
sory experience of Greek theater, he had no
direct experience of the work in the theater at
the time of writing the book.52

Still, if Nietzsche’s interpretation of Wagne-
rian music drama did not directly correspond
with his more down-to-earth encounters with
particular musical texts and performance
events, there is no denying the extent of his
involvement with the Bayreuth undertaking,
both as a close friend of Wagner and as a well-
connected benefactor of the festival under the
newly established Patronatverein (Patrons’ As-
sociation). On a practical level, he regularly
helped to promote Wagner’s funding schemes,
networking with members of the newly estab-
lished German “Wagner Societies” (Wagner-
vereine), including the music publisher and
piano manufacturer Emil Heckel—who founded
the first such society in Mannheim in 1871.53
When Heckel invited Wagner to conduct a large-
scale orchestral fundraising concert in Decem-
ber that year, Nietzsche duly traveled by train
to Mannheim to attend the performance and
rehearsals. The all-German program, which
was designed and conducted by Wagner, consisted
entirely of orchestral music. It opened with his
patриotic Kaisermarsch, composed earlier the
same year in explicit celebration of German
victory in the Franco-Prussian war. Then fol-
lowed Mozart’s Magic Flute Overture, Beeth-
oven’s Seventh Symphony, the preludes to
Lohengrin and Die Meistersinger, and the
Vorspiel und Liebestod from Tristan und Isolde.
Upon returning to Basel, Nietzsche wrote en-

52Nietzsche attended the premiere of Die Meistersinger in
Dresden in 1868, but it was not until after the publication
of The Birth of Tragedy that he experienced a full produc-
tion of Tristan in Munich under Hans von Bülow in June
1872. On Nietzsche’s relationship with Tristan and his en-
counter with the piano-vocal score, see Katherine Fry,
“Nietzsche, Tristan und Isolde and the Analysis of Wag-
53Wagner established the Patronatverein in 1871 under the
encouragement of the pianist Carl Tausig and socialite
Marie von Schleinz. In 1872 Nietzsche contributed the sub-
scription fee of 300 Thalers [900 Marks] in exchange for a
Patronatscheine (Patron Certificate) to guarantee a seat at
the first festival for multiple performances of the Ring
Cycle. See William H. Schaberg, The Nietzsche Canon: A
Publication History and Bibliography (Chicago: University
of Chicago Press, 1995), 56. On the origins of the Wagner
societies in the 1870s as fundraising initiatives for Bayreuth,
see Nicholas Vazsonyi, Richard Wagner: Self-Promotion
and the Making of a Brand (Cambridge: Cambridge Uni-
versity Press, 2010), 169–204.
thrusts to his colleague Erwin Rohde, alluding to a natural affinity between this latest musical experience and the presentiments laid out in his recently completed manuscript: “I feel wonderfully assured in my knowledge of music and convinced of its rightness—as a result of what I have experienced in Mannheim this week together with Wagner.”

It was not long, however, before Nietzsche would question his allegiance to contemporary music amid the practicalities of constructing the Bayreuth theater and preparing the Ring for production, coupled with his growing ideological detachment from Wagner.

Whereas the unpublished writings of 1868–74 reveal Nietzsche’s critical engagement with Schopenhauer, his notebooks dating from 1874 to 1875 reveal the emergence of his more unfavorable stance on Wagner. In one particularly prescient note, he calls into question what he sees as Wagner’s aesthetics of transcendence, now implying a distinction from his affirmative theory of Dionysian tragedy: “there is something in Wagner’s art that resembles flight from this world; it negates this world, it does not transfigure it.” Relating this negation of the world to Wagner’s affinity with Schopenhauer, he goes on to suggest that “the strength and weakness of Wagner’s art lie in this artistic attitude: it is difficult to return from it to life in its simplicity. Improvement of the real no longer is the goal, but rather destruction of or delusion about the real.” Alongside this reassessment of Wagner’s philosophical pessimism, he also appears to question the composer’s aspiration to unify music, language, and stage action. As he sees it, the problem in unifying artistic media lies in the different temporal qualities of verbal language and musical composition. He maintains that the error implicit in Italian recitative lay in the attempt to impose restrictive temporal laws on the composer, laws that are governed by the conceptual world of verbal drama. Wagner—by operating as both composer and poet—moved beyond the suppression of independent musical expression in conventional opera: “he employs gesture, language, language melody, and in addition to this the accepted symbols of musical expression. He presupposes a form of music whose state of development is extremely rich, one that already has established a more stable, recognizable, and recurrent expression for a host of emotions.” At the same time, Nietzsche now contends that this use of music as a means of dramatic expression necessarily subordinates it to the role of allegory. In other words, music sacrifices internal coherence and meaning by drawing its significance from outside itself.

Nietzsche’s unpublished comments clearly reveal a more multifaceted portrait of Wagner’s novelty and significance as a musical dramatist than the one depicted in The Birth of Tragedy from two years earlier. Even so, he remained outwardly committed to supporting the Bayreuth undertaking during these years, continuing his activities as a loyal patron and campaigner. In October 1873, he assisted with a nationwide campaign to boost sales of the Patron Certificates by drafting a two-page pamphlet, “Mahnuruf an die Deutschen” [Exhortation to the German People], in which he cau-
tioned against what he saw as public indifference and passivity toward a cultural figure of timely national importance. This effort to mobilize mass support was followed by his even more loquacious tribute, “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth,” which he published shortly before the opening of the theater and the premiere of the Ring in the summer of 1876. As we know, Nietzsche would retrospectively date his decisive break from the composer to his actual experience of the Bayreuth festival: in his autobiography, he dramatized the rupture in stark ideological terms, describing how he had come to recognize Wagner in Bayreuth not as a genuine rebirth of German culture, but as an extension of bourgeois cultural philistinism and as the epitome of reichsdeutsch. At stake was his belief that Wagner had not only conceded his artistic vision of a new music theater to imperialism, but that he had become enthralled to Christian symbolism and Schopenhauerian pessimism. Moreover, and before twentieth-century philosophers and theorists interpreted Wagner as a precursor to cinema and new media, Nietzsche believed that Wagner’s relevance lay beyond a narrow history of classical composition to encompass technologized mass culture. In Der Fall Wagner (The Case of Wagner, 1888), he portrayed the composer as an “incomparable histrion,” as Germany’s “scenist par excellence,” and as a musical dramatist who went to new lengths in utilizing the full resources of orchestral timbre as a means to appeal to the masses and “persuade the nerves.”

Without doubting Nietzsche’s political and aesthetic objections, the image of a sudden break goes against the more gradual development of his critical position, which evolved as much out of his direct practical involvement in musical life in 1870s Germany as it did out of his personal antipathy to Wagner as an individual artist. Through his regular attendance at concerts and premieres, his patronage of the Bayreuth theater, and his association with an expanding network of national and regional musical societies, he not only displayed his outward loyalty as a personal friend and supporter of the composer and his works, but acquired critical insights into the performing conditions and administrative processes of a burgeoning cultural institution: one he would increasingly come to associate with the modern nation state. Seen in this light, Nietzsche’s changing position on Wagner constitutes one facet of his larger aspiration to incorporate music into his philosophy of culture. This project began with The Birth of Tragedy and continued after he explicitly turned away from his former mentors, resulting in a fresh stance on questions of musical expression and listening in Human, All Too Human.

In a notable aphorism from the chapter on art and artists—entitled simply “Music”—Nietzsche soberly revisits the question of musical meaning addressed at length in his writings from five years earlier. The extract reflects a significant turning point both in his philosophical outlook on music and in the development of his anti-Romantic rhetorical style:

Music is, in and of itself, not so significant for our inner world, nor so profoundly exciting, that it can be said to count as the immediate language of feeling, but its primeval union with poetry has deposited so much symbolism into rhythmic movement, into the varying strength and volume of musical sounds, that we now suppose it to speak directly to the inner world and to come from the inner world.

---

62 At Wagner’s recommendation, Heckel had invited Nietzsche to produce the appeal on behalf of the patrons, to be distributed to thousands of bookstores and music dealers with subscription lists across Germany. Copies of Nietzsche’s pamphlet were circulated at the executive meeting of the Wagner societies in Bayreuth on 31 October. Ironically, however, even the Bayreuth delegates regarded his strident Wagnerian rhetoric as ill suited to the task of communicating to a broader public still largely unconverted to Wagner’s cause, and his draft was rejected in favor of a shorter Bericht und Aufruf (Report and Call), written by a Dr. Adolf Stern. This version failed to result in any substantial increase in either donations or membership. See Schaberg, The Nietzsche Canon, 36.


64 KSA, VI, 26–32; The Case of Wagner, in The Anti-Christ. Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings, 244–48.
Dramatic music becomes possible only when the tonal art has conquered an enormous domain of symbolic means, through song, opera and a hundred experiments in tone-painting. “Absolute music” is either form in itself, at a primitive stage of music in which sounds made in tempo and at varying volume gave pleasure as such, or symbolism of form speaking to the understanding without poetry after both arts had been united over a long course of evolution and the musical form had finally been entirely enmeshed in threads of feeling and concepts. Men who have remained behind in the evolution of music can understand in a purely formalistic way the same piece of music as the more advanced understand wholly symbolically. In itself no music is profound or significant, it does not speak of the “will” or the “thing in itself”; the intellect could suppose such a thing only in an age which had conquered for musical symbolism the entire compass of the inner life.  

This statement stands as Nietzsche’s first public rejection of Schopenhauer’s theory that music is a direct expression of the unconscious will, a theory he had begun to critique and revise in his earlier writings, while still retaining a modified metaphysics of music through his concept of the Dionysian. As we have seen, Nietzsche had already contested Schopenhauer’s philosophy on the basis that music cannot speak directly of the will, not least because this idealist concept is itself merely a sign for a realm of unconscious drives and impulses that are essentially unknowable. In this passage from 1878, he goes further in exposing Schopenhauer’s metaphysical aesthetics of music as universalizing and misguided because of their denial of music’s historicity as a medium subject to particular conditions of acculturation. In so doing, he develops a further line of thought evident from his early writings, this time on “absolute” music as a particularity of modern times. On the one hand, he suggests that music without text can evoke pleasure in the play of rhythmic movement and dynamics that make up structured sound as such; on the other, he contends that the intellectual perception of music as a nonverbal language of metaphysical depths is a uniquely modern construct, one he sees as closely bound up with the emancipation of instrumental forms from an original symbiosis with poetry.

This historically grounded revaluation of Western music appears on one level to undermine Romantic aesthetics of expression on the basis that music is devoid of meaningful content after all, that its potential for deeper emotional and intellectual significance (as distinct from pleasure in the play of sounds in motion) must always depend on mediation through language and the intellect. Thus Andrew Bowie has suggested that Nietzsche’s new attitude to music in the above passage amounts to an outright reversal of his earlier position, one that ultimately circles back to Hegel’s aesthetics by assuming that “all there is to say about music depends upon concepts, and that what it offers is symbolism of ‘inner life,’ which has now been conquered by the intellect.” However, and looking beyond debates about “absolute” music within metaphysical aesthetics, Nietzsche’s statement can also be understood as integral to his broader ambition in Human, All Too Human to dispel idealist myths by adopting a historical approach to analysis, one now based on the model of science. In the opening chapter of the work, he gives an indication of his overall approach in opposition to what he sees as a fundamental error of earlier philosophy: “Lack of historical sense is the family failing of all philosophers; many, without being aware of it, even take the most recent manifestation of man, such as has arisen under the impress of certain religions, even certain political events, as the fixed form from which one has to start out.” While Nietzsche’s critique of philosophical constructions of subjectivity in this context is characteristically sweeping, it is important in revealing the extent to which he sought to position himself outside a metaphysical tradition that he now sees as inclusive of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. In order to counter what he sees as Western philosophy’s image of “man” as an immutable fact, he proposes instead the need for “historical philoso-
phizing, and with it the virtue of modesty."\(^{68}\)

Seen in this light, Nietzsche’s aphorism on “Music” is an attempt to apply such “historical philosophizing” as an alternative to metaphysical aesthetics that would raise German instrumental music to a universal principle.

Against Kant and Schopenhauer’s conceptions of art as disinterested contemplation, Nietzsche begins to turn his attention to physiological and sensory dimensions of aesthetic experience, addressing questions of musical meaning as closely bound up with issues of perception, and with changes in musical material and listening over time. The consequences of this method go beyond just the demystification of “absolute” music as an intellectual construct. Indeed, Nietzsche does not deny music’s capacity for meaningful expression as such, but implies that this capacity is less an innate quality of music in general, more the outcome of a process of evolution and adaptation wherein the intellect comes to perceive meaning through “the symbolism of rhythmic movement.”\(^{69}\)

The fact that instrumental music can be understood as an “immediate language of feeling” in modern times—he argues—depends on the reciprocal development of hearing to a point where music appeals to the intellect as imbued with residues of speech and gesture. In two related aphorisms that follow, he elaborates on this argument, portraying the faculty of hearing as adaptable. In “Gebärde und Sprache” (Gesture and Language), he appears to return to his theory of the origins of language and music from five years earlier, this time in order to demythologize music’s expressive capacity as the outcome of a process of sensory “habituation”: “While music was at first empty noise without explanatory dance and mime [gesture-language], the ear was, through long habituation to the juxtaposition of music and movement, schooled to an instantaneous interpretation of the total figurations and has at last attained to a height of rapid understanding at which it no longer has any need of the visible movement and understands the tone-poet without it.”\(^{70}\)

He goes on to reflect at greater length on this evolution of music into a nuanced symbolic medium in modern times, remarking on the consequences of this development for practices of listening in the late nineteenth century. In the aphorism “Die Entsinnlichung der höheren Kunst” (The Desensualization of Higher Art), he points to a paradox whereby modern listeners endure greater noise and volume than previous generations, precisely as a result of ever-more refined and cultivated ears.\(^{71}\)

On the one hand, he describes the loss of sensuous immediacy that results from an intellectualized aesthetic practice whereby the ear is attuned to listen attentively for the significance and meaning in sounds. On the other, he pursues the consequences of his evolutionary stance to the point of distinguishing two different types of listeners in contemporary Germany: “on the one hand a host of ten thousand with ever higher, more refined demands, listening ever more intently for the ‘meaning,’ and on the other an enormous majority growing every year more and more incapable of comprehending the meaningful even in the form of the sensually ugly and therefore learning to seize with greater and greater contentment the ugly and disgusting in itself, that is to say the basely sensual, in music.”\(^{72}\)

These passages show Nietzsche’s incorporation of music and musical culture more broadly into his critique of Socratic rationalism in a way that anticipates many aspects of his late writings on modern music and the physiology

---

\(^{68}\) Demnach ist das historische Philosophiren von jetzt ab nöthig und mit ihm die Tugend der Bescheidung”; KSA, II, 24; HAH, I, 13.

\(^{69}\) Max Paddison has interpreted Nietzsche’s revaluation of music in aphorisms 215 and 216 of Human, All Too Human as presenting a theory of autonomous musical material based on a dialectic of form and expression. He suggests that Nietzsche’s aphorisms mark a rejection of the aesthetics of feeling, but “point in the direction of symbolism by suggesting that the material of music is itself permeated by figures and gestures which are redolent with meaning, but which are sublimated through the form of the work. The apparent meaninglessness of autonomous music is thus seen to be a sublimation of meaning in a very real sense.” See “Music as Ideal: Aesthetics of Autonomy,” in The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music, ed. Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 318–42, especially 336–37.

\(^{70}\) HAH, I, 100.

\(^{71}\) KSA, II, 177; HAH, I, 100.

\(^{72}\) KSA, II, 178; HAH, I, 100–01.
of aesthetics. Hence it might be tempting to read this new outlook on music as correcting and overturning the ethical claims for Dionysian music as presented in his earlier writings, teaching us in no uncertain terms the essential historicity of musical material and listening practices. The appearance of Human, All Too Human certainly marked a new departure from The Birth of Tragedy, not just in its adoption of the aphoristic prose style that would come to distinguish many of his subsequent philosophical works, but in its forceful rejection of metaphysical aesthetics and its newfound admiration for scientific practices and historical methods. Indeed, if Nietzsche’s departure from Bayreuth signaled the beginning of his estrangement from Wagner, the years 1876–78 marked the emergence of his independent voice as a philosopher—a transition that was facilitated at least in part by his self-imposed exile on health grounds in southern Switzerland, Italy, and France. Against this background, his writings from the years following his first book inevitably entail a tone of self-criticism and negation as he sought to revalue his aesthetics of music beyond the legacy of German idealism. As he remarked in his notebook while residing in Sorrento: “To readers of my earlier writings I want to declare unequivocally that I have abandoned the metaphysico-artistic views that essentially dominate those writings: they are pleasant but untenable. If one takes the liberty of speaking in public early one is usually obliged to contradict oneself in public soon after.” Nietzsche’s changing positions on metaphysics of music, on Wagner, and on contemporary German music more generally, clearly give rise to discrepancies and contradictions in his overall thought. At the same time, it would be misleading to interpret the development of his philosophical outlook on music simply as a rejection of his youthful idealism in favor of a position of enlightened materialism. This is not to dismiss the universalizing assumptions attached to his early aesthetic ideology of German music. Rather, it is to acknowledge the distance between his ideas about music in The Birth of Tragedy and Schopenhauer’s metaphysics and philosophy of art written much earlier in the century, as well as a degree of continuity in his commitment to problems of musical expression and listening as a philosopher of culture in the 1870s. To periodize Nietzsche’s attitudes toward music too sharply during this short period would be to overlook the relationship between his public and more private writings, as well as the relevance of aspects of his early outlook for the later development and legacy of his musical thought.

In the “Attempt at Self-Criticism” from 1886, Nietzsche insisted that his original concept of Dionysian music remained significant in spite of his turn away from German Romanticism: “Setting aside all the premature hopes and the erroneous morals applied to the most contemporary things with which I ruined my first book, however, the great Dionysiac question it poses remains (with regard to music, too) as valid as ever: what would music be like if it were no longer Romantic in its origins, as German music is, but Dionysiac!” As he developed a radical and prescient critique of metaphysics and modernity in his late texts, he opposed Wagner [and German Romanticism more generally] to “Dionysian classicism,” advocating composers such as Bizet, Offenbach, Rossini, Mendelssohn, Chopin, among others. Moreover, and looking beyond the music of his time, there is no denying the far-reaching influence and legacy of his aesthetic theories and concepts for compositional developments in twentieth-century modernism and the avant-garde: from the explicitly Nietzsche-inspired aesthetics of Frederick Delius, Gustav Mahler, and Richard Strauss to the anti-Wagnerism of Debussy.

---

73Having obtained sick leave from Basel in 1876, Nietzsche traveled from Bayreuth to Klingenbrunn and then on to Bex, Geneva, Genoa, and Sorrento, where he remained until May 1877. Following his subsequent resignation from the professorship on health grounds in 1879, he spent his remaining productive years moving between various residences in Switzerland and the French and Italian Mediterranean until his final mental and physical collapse in Turin in 1889.

74KSA, VIII, 463; EN, 228.

75KSA, I, 20; BT, 10–11.

76For a full account of Nietzsche’s musical aesthetics and preferences following his turn away from Wagner, see in particular Georges Liébert, Nietzsche and Music, 164–204.
Stravinsky, and Paris-based modernists, to Italian Futurism, postwar experimentalism and free improvisation.\(^7\)

If Nietzsche reformulated his conception of the Dionysian in opposition to the Romantic pessimism of Wagner and Schopenhauer, some of his last writings are also notable for the way in which they recuperate another idea familiar from his earlier texts: that of music as resistant to verbal language and as a positive model for philosophy. Whereas Human, All Too Human presents a vision of Western music as subject to processes of rationalization and acculturation, many of Nietzsche's last writings return to more general metaphors of music, sound, and listening as integral to his philosophy. In a note from 1887, he reflects on the limitations of verbal language, this time in explicit comparison to music: “compared to music all communication by words is shameless; words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalise; words make the uncommon common.”\(^78\) He implies that musical expression—as exemplified by the voice—points to a degree of originality and creativity that is unmatched by the written word. It is precisely this loss of subjectivity that he takes up in his self-critical preface to the republication of The Birth of Tragedy, wherein he reflects on questions of philosophical style. Here he upholds an idea of music, as a way to transcend the confines of ordinary philosophical language through a distinctive style of his own: “it ought to have sung, this ‘new soul’ and not talked!”\(^79\)

Philosophers and biographers on Nietzsche

---


\(^79\)KSA, I, 15; BT, 6.

---


\(^81\)This is not to suggest that Nietzsche’s critique of Romantic metaphysics of music is a radical exception within nineteenth-century aesthetic theory. Andrew Bowie has related Nietzsche’s late critical writings on aesthetics and metaphysics to earlier Idealist and Romantic philosophy, suggesting that “Nietzsche's ambiguous relationship to
On one level, Nietzsche’s gradual turn away from Romanticism, his critique of metaphysics, and his efforts to understand and appreciate music’s power away from quasi-religious notions of aesthetic transcendence resonates and coheres with the recent material turn in music historiography and criticism. Whereas much attention has been paid to Nietzsche’s individual relationships with particular composers, repertoires, and musical works within and beyond his own time, his revaluation of metaphysical aesthetics of music in the 1870s is clearly important for developing wider cultural histories and theories of listening in late-nineteenth-century Europe. Having said this, the development of his ideas about music cannot be reduced simply to a rejection of idealism in favor of a mode of “historical philosophizing” that would prioritize music’s materiality and cultural particularity. Rather than reading Nietzsche’s emergent critical outlook on Schopenhauer and Wagner as reflecting an unequivocal turn to “the material,” the relevance of his early writings on music lies more in the way they introduce a productive tension between music as a product of modern rationalization subject to analysis and critique, and as a persistent aesthetic counter model to philosophy and language. In this respect, and despite his critique of Romanticism, Nietzsche maintains, both in his early and late writings, a residual metaphysics of music, one in which the ideal of music’s meaningful presence transgresses verbal language and the quest for fixed truths without disclosing a metaphysical “beyond.”

**Abstract.**

Much has been written about the importance of music and music making to Nietzsche’s life and works as a whole, and the relevance of his philosophy for particular composers, repertoires, and works. Meanwhile, music historians and philosophers have approached Nietzsche’s musical aesthetics by way of larger nineteenth-century paradigms such as “absolute” music or the history of “metaphysics.” This article explores Nietzsche’s philosophical writings on music from the 1870s as they reveal the emergence of his critical outlook on Romantic aesthetics and the musical culture of his time. Against the backdrop of more recent debates about material culture and aesthetics in current musicology, it traces the development of his critical ideas about musical expression and listening as presented in his published and unpublished texts, concentrating on the period from *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geist der Musik* (The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music, 1872) to the first volume of *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (Human, All Too Human, 1878). Rather than foreground Nietzsche’s relationship with particular composers or works, it illuminates his double relationship with music as actual compositional practice in society and as an idealist metaphor for philosophy. Keywords: musical aesthetics, materialism, philosophy of music, Friedrich Nietzsche, Richard Wagner.