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***Nietzsche's Artistic Ideal in Human, All Too
Human
and the Case of Music***

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to consider if and how music can satisfy the demands of Nietzsche's conception of successful art in *Human, All Too Human* and its two supplements. The two main criteria of his artistic ideal, I argue, are the artist's successful demonstration of a "dance in chains" and a certain realism in the work's subject matter. I intend to show that music's satisfaction of this ideal as a whole hinges on its expressive capacities, which Nietzsche progressively reconsiders in these texts, as well as on how the composers manage them.

1. Introduction

In this paper², I would like to examine Nietzsche's well-known

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2 In what follows, I will refer to Nietzsche's aphorisms directly in the text, by indicating the abbreviated title of the book it comes from and the number of the relevant paragraph in parentheses. The abbreviations used are as follows: HH = *Human, All Too Human* (the first volume of the 1886 edition), MOM = *Mixed Opinions and Maxims*, WS = *The Wanderer and His Shadow*. Unless otherwise specified, I used Hollingdale's translation for the texts from *Human, All Too Human* I and II. See the bibliography for the other translations used. I quote Nietzsche's "posthumous fragments" by indicating the year in which they were

illustration of artistic creation as a “dance in chains” in its application to music. This model is presented with varying levels of emphasis in all three books that together constitute the second edition of *Human, All Too Human*³, but it is only in the last one, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, that it is explicitly put in relation with music.⁴ Very briefly put, Nietzsche’s idea is that successful art is a demonstration of artistic mastery in (more or less) arbitrary constraints,⁵ so that “both the constraint and its conquest are noticed and admired” (WS140). The kind of artwork thus produced, by exciting “emulation and envy” (MOM99), could have a transformative effect on its public and teach it in turn how to overcome its own feelings of limitations through a similar self-fashioning (MOM172).

Nietzsche initially had some reservations about the possible realization of this goal by music. Before *The Wanderer*, he had limited this possibility to poetry. According to him, for the work of art to serve as a model, it had to depict something determined; but Nietzsche now rejected the idea that music could symbolize anything but affective states. Without a clear, conceptually mediated referent, music, it seems, could not attain the “monumentality” essential to the

written (for more clarity in the chronology), their number in the *Kritische Studienausgabe* (KSA), as well as the volume and page number in this same edition.

3 For reasons of space and ease of reading, I will shorten the titles of Nietzsche’s books after their first mention for the rest of this paper.

4 Compare HH221, MOM99, WS140 & WS159.

5 See HH221 (modified translation): “To fetter oneself in this way can seem absurd; nonetheless there is no way of getting free of naturalization than that of first limiting oneself to what is most severe (perhaps also most arbitrary).” The constraints can obviously hardly be entirely arbitrary, but it is important to distinguish the instrumental character of artistic limitations (which are intentionally imposed to be overcome) and the various limitations history in all its guises imposes upon the artist. See section 2 below for more on that subject.

creation of models of human life made harmonious.⁶ Nevertheless, in §159 of *The Wanderer*, Nietzsche applies it to Chopin without any apparent reservations, and implies that music, too, could satisfy this ideal to some extent. But how much, really, could music satisfy the broader formative ideal that Nietzsche links to this notion in *Mixed Opinions and Maxims*? I will try to provide an answer to this question by taking a brief look at the development of his ideas on musical expression, his use of the metaphor of “dancing in chains” and his characterization of Chopin in *The Wanderer*.

2. Expression and Expressivity Before the Second Part of *Human, All Too Human*

In the *Birth of Tragedy*, art's highest task, as paradigmatically exemplified by Attic Tragedy, is to allow the integration of a pessimistic sensibility into a *Weltanschauung* that nevertheless allows for life and action. This is achieved through the interplay of the Dionysian and the Apollonian artistic drives in a tragic *Gesamtkunstwerk* that is both expressive (Dionysus) and beautiful (Apollo). Through its analogy with the deepest structure of the world, Dionysian music allows its auditor a glimpse both into the fundamental contradictions of existence and into its underlying unity. Such an insight, as important as it may be for Nietzsche, is a rather dangerous thing: this knowledge of the contradictions of the world, even if coupled with joy at the perspective of a newfound freedom

⁶ See 1878, 27[96] (KSA 8, p. 502) and MOM99.

from the world of individuation, is incompatible with the conditions of active life, and leads to depressive states. As said by Byron's Manfred, whom Nietzsche liked to quote to make this recurring point (Byron, 2000, p. 275):

Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most
Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth,
The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.

Despite and because of the importance of this Dionysian insight, illusion must remain essential to life. The constant struggle of these two drives determines art history, beyond ancient history and into the present. Thus, in *The Birth*, Nietzsche understood good art as an artistic transfiguration of unique knowledge of a special and unique value.

By the time he wrote *Human*, Nietzsche had renounced this view of art. In this book, he took his departure from a certain unquestioned Heraclitus-inspired metaphysical stance,⁷ but he did not consider the truth to be available in the musical works of genius anymore: it had to be searched for. Moreover, it seems that his approach somewhat agreed with the Socratic optimism he had so thoroughly condemned in *The Birth*, since he could now assert that religion could be overcome through refutation (HH135).⁸ He now reflected on the arts separately rather than as an artistic "pentathlon"

7 See Heller (1972), p. 4 *sq.*

8 For the idea that this was not an idea he wished to advance, but a sort of *mise-en-scène* of the past development of his own thinking, see the introduction in Meyer (2019).

(Nietzsche, 2013, p. 20) modelled on attic tragedy, and though he still thought of music as an expressive affair, he no longer defended the idea that it could *express* something in any strong, symbolic sense. Without a privileged analogical relationship to the world of the “primal unity” (*Ur-Einen*) music could not symbolize simply in virtue of its nature: it could no longer be a “copy” (*Abbild*) of the “Will” through a metaphysical affinity. Instead, Nietzsche now admitted for all music what he had said to be a limitation of pre-Wagnerian opera,⁹ namely, that music’s expressive qualities had been carried over from its long association with rhetoric. This meant, first, that they concerned not the expressed thing, but rather the pathos associated with its expression; and second, that this expressivity had been made possible by learned, conventional associations (HH215-216).

This expressivity is, in HH, at the center of Nietzsche’s rejection of the arts.¹⁰ The main thrust of this critique, in line with the broader goal of *Human*, is primarily directed at art’s (and especially music’s) pretensions as a source of profound knowledge, such as that to which Wagner’s Schopenhauer-inspired aesthetics purported.

⁹ Wagner was never entirely free of these limitations: he possessed both Dionysian wisdom and an authentically operatic tendency. But that is precisely why he could push the operatic logic to its limit and thus force it to “overcome” itself (1871, 9[48]; KSA 7, p. 293; see also 1871, 9[90, 127 & 135]; KSA 7, p. 306-307, 321 & 323-324). The experience of the first Bayreuth festival in 1876, to Nietzsche, showed that Wagner could and would in fact do no such thing (see 1878, 30[1]; KSA 8, p. 522) and the letter to Mathilde Maier of early August 1878 [in Nietzsche, 1986, Bd 5, p. 337-338, #734]).

¹⁰ Young astutely remarks that, in HH, Nietzsche’s attacks are always directed at the art of “the beyond,” that is, sublime art (p. 71). I believe this is because he did not believe at that point in the possibility of a renewed art of the beautiful (compare his remarks on Goethe in HH221 with the subsequent MOM99). Thus, I would interpret his focus on sublime art as a focus on what he then took to be the most advanced and the most potent form of art, rather than a door left open for beautiful art.

Despite its lack of epistemic import, rhetorical expressivity could serve as a caution for such claims to knowledge. By triggering learned and automatically occurring affective responses, they could be the cause of an impression of depth and importance in the listener, which could in turn be transferred onto the supposed knowledge and convince the listener of its depth or value (HH161).

The object of Nietzsche's critique was not artistic expressivity in itself, but the fact that it is most often used with dishonesty: it masquerades as a primordial language brought to expression through the mystical power of genius, while it is in fact a conventional language the artist uses to consolidate her privileged social position. In addition to this "symbolic" pretension of music made possible by expressivity, Nietzsche had qualms about the effect expressive music had on its public, or rather the use it made of it. Intensely expressive art has, according to him, a tendency to lead its public to destructive or counterproductive ways of engaging with it. Whether they listen to it to forget and use it as a narcotic of sorts (MOM159); or rather than purged of them, become used and prone to fear and pity (HH212); or perhaps, even, insufficiently trained in the subtleties of music's expressive language and taken by its roughness and brutality, they are made themselves into rough brutes (HH217): in all these cases, the risks, clearly, dwarf the potential rewards.

This expressive character could not, though, be wrested away from music. The affective states we associate with certain perceptual properties of the music, carried over from rhetoric through prolonged association, appear to stick to it no matter what we try, in theory as

well as in practice.¹¹ Furthermore, as time goes by, music must become more and more expressive as its associations multiply and as the human sensibility grows deeper.¹² The pretensions of the musician to the expression of a valuable knowledge, at this point, could then be seen as no more than a trick, relying on representations regarding the status of the artist and on his capacities, as well as finding confirmation in the expressivity of the music itself. Regardless, this did not necessarily imply that musical expressivity was in itself reprehensible; yet there did not seem, at that point, to remain an open path ahead for the musicians, or indeed for the artists in general.¹³

3. Chains and Fetters

Mixed Opinions, the first supplement to *Human*, saw Nietzsche reconsider his judgment on Goethe's limitations as an artist. No longer marred by the decidedly sentimental posture in which he "lived in art as in recollection of true art" (HH221), Goethe's poetry, Nietzsche now affirmed, was one that could serve as a "*signpost to the future*" (MOM99) and be the source of a renewed artistic practice,

11 Hanslick himself, the herald of musical formalism and avowed opponent of Wagner, recognized that music did (vaguely) evoke affects through the analogy of its processes with those of affective events. In fact, he sometimes relied on subjective impressions such as those he criticized in *Vom musikalischen Schönen* in his musical criticism (See p. 17 in Kivy, 1990). See also the developments on the persistence of expressivity in Schönberg's twelve-tone music in the first part of Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music*.

12 See the variant of HH219 from the fair copy, KSA 14, p. 137: "If the thought of a rebirth of the ancient world now surfaces once again, we will long for a more inspired ancient world (*einem beseelteren Alterthum*) than did the fifteenth century" (G. Handwerk's translation in Nietzsche [1997], p. 336). We find echoes of this idea MOM126.

13 See the remarks on Goethe in HH221.

in conformity with that of the Ancients. Regarding music, on the other hand, Nietzsche was more openly critical, naming Wagner (whose name had been entirely absent from *Human*) as the culprit for the transition of music into a baroque period. In the second supplement to *Human, The Wanderer* (of which, again, Wagner's name is entirely absent), Nietzsche suggests that music could perhaps do the same as poetry when he implies that Chopin could serve as a similar "signpost" since he, too, could "danc[e] in fetters" (WS159).

This image of a "dancing in chains" (*in Ketten Tanzen*) or in "fetters" (*Fesseln*) as a metaphor for artistic creation came from Voltaire, to whom, incidentally, *Human All Too Human* was dedicated in its first edition. In a letter dated January 24, 1761, Voltaire writes to Deodati de Tovazzi, who had sent him a copy of his book on *The Excellence of the Italian Language*, to contest his hasty declaration of the superiority of Italian over French. After defending the sonorities of the French language and its lexical abundance, he turns to a comparison of the rules imposed on the poet of both languages (Voltaire, 1876, pp. 425–426):

You have, sir, many more actual advantages [sc. than that of creating diminutives], that of inversions, that of making a hundred good verses in Italian more easily than we can make ten in French. The reason for this facility is that you allow yourselves these hiatuses, these gaps in syllables that we proscribe; all your words ending in *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, provide you with at least twenty times more rhymes than we have, and, on top

of that, you can still do without rhymes. You are less enslaved than we are to the hemistich and the caesura; you dance in freedom, and we dance with our chains.¹⁴

Voltaire introduces the image to establish the added difficulty of composing verses in French, not as an ideal, but as a descriptive account of poetical practice. Indeed, he writes a few lines later that, “[i]f the people have formed languages, great men perfect them with good books; and the first of all languages is the one with the most excellent books” (Voltaire, 1876, p. 426).¹⁵ The result, and not the quantity of limitations opposed to creation, determine the quality of the work; the constraints are historically inherited and have to be mastered. In addition, the chains are meant here not to signal just any constraint, but an excess of them: the Italian poet is “free” inasmuch as she is not as constrained as the French, but she is only comparatively free. The dancer and the poet are always limited by rules and other resistances, by the unforgiving regularity of the rhythm, by the inertia of the body or the mind, and so forth. Thus Voltaire, with this image of “dancing in chains,” highlights the simple fact that linguistic and artistic conventions oppose much more resistance to the ease of poetical creation to the French than to the Italians.

Nietzsche uses this same formulation (in the infinitive) in the

14 The translations from French are my own. In Nietzsche’s personal exemplar of this book (conserved at the *Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek Weimar*), he draws two vertical lines in the margin next to the last sentence, and underlines the last word, “chains” (*chaînes*).

15 Nietzsche also marks this passage with a vertical line in the margin of his exemplar.

title of §140 of *The Wanderer*, but he avoids it everywhere else in the three books which together make up the second edition of *Human*, except for a mention in quotation marks in the same aphorism—and this although he discusses the idea a number of times. Everywhere else, Nietzsche speaks of “dancing in fetters” (*Fesseln*) rather than in chains (*Ketten*). This is particularly remarkable in §221 of *Human*, on “*The Revolution in Poetry*,” in which there is not a single mention of chains. This may seem like a minor lexical difference, but Nietzsche was not one to approximate with metaphors.¹⁶ By this change in terminology, he signals a shift in metaphorical regime for the idea and a consequent redefinition of its parameters. The chains evoke continuity as well as constraint; the image is linked with ideas such as necessity and history’s weight, much like the shadow of *The Wanderer*’s title and of its framing dialogue. The fetters, on the other hand, are an image of immediate constraints, without additional temporal significance. Nietzsche’s modification of the terms of the comparison, then, evacuates the reference to history and traditional practice, and focuses instead on the attainment of artistic mastery despite constraints that were added to the ones that already belong to the process of creation.¹⁷

This was, according to him, how the Greeks made their art, as well as the practice towards which Goethe strived and could serve as

16 For a classic treatment of Nietzsche’s use of “overdetermined metaphors,” see chapter 2 in Blondel (1991).

17 This does not mean that all such fetters are ahistorical, but rather that they must not necessarily be historical. As such, I believe that Ponton’s (2004) very interesting treatment of the idea is nevertheless unduly restricted to some such historical “fetters,” namely, conventions, while Nietzsche’s image is much wider in scope.

a guide. But this condition, to Nietzsche, is still not entirely sufficient. He also demands of art a certain realism in the choice of materials,¹⁸ best realized through a process of linguistic reference. The mastery in arbitrary constraints alone cannot imbue art with an effective formative character: a representation of contemporary reality is also essential if the work is to contribute to its public's (self-)cultivation. This does not mean a mere reproduction of the effective world, nor a sustained depiction of its worst aspects. Rather, realism is essential for the production of a "functional" ideal, one that the public could actively benefit from. The best way to teach harmony to her public is for the artist to take the contemporary conditions of life and provide a model of how to attain liberty and grace within them (MOM 99).

This, for now, kept Nietzsche's broader artistic ideal inaccessible to music. If art has not to merely present a ready-made ideal life, but to exemplify its fashioning out of available materials, then how could music, if it were impossible for it to refer to anything outside of itself but to a conventional affective language, provide such content? Its abstraction appeared to disqualify it from this function, and thus it mostly remained stuck in a dead end in *Mixed Opinions*, as poetry had found a way out.

4. Chopin's Barcarolle

This leads us, finally, to Nietzsche's application of the image to music, in spite of the difficulties he had previously often insisted on.

18 See especially MOM114 and 99, as well as the posthumous fragment cited above in note 5.

In *The Wanderer* §159, titled “*Freedom in fetters (Fesseln)*—a princely freedom,” he praises Chopin after having pointed out the shortfalls of the composers of the German tradition, and writes:

[...] Chopin had the same princely elegance of convention that Raphael displays in his use of the simplest traditional colours—not with regard to colours, however, but with regard to the traditions of melody and rhythm. He accepted them as he was *born in etiquette*, but playing and dancing in these fetters (*Fesseln*) like the freest and most graceful spirit—and, of course, without mocking them.¹⁹

Chopin’s music, he now argues, succeeds in attaining the appearance of freedom in added constraints that is characteristic of the “dance in chains.” Moreover, a preliminary draft of the passage provides us with an even stronger characterization of his success:

He accepted them [*sc.* the fetters] as he was *born in etiquette*, except that Chopin knew how to dance within the old forms of melody and rhythmical conventions, *as no musician ever succeeded in dancing outside of them.*²⁰

Despite the fetters he takes on, “Chopin, the inimitable” (*id.*), dances with more freedom and grace than all musicians, with or without

¹⁹ Hollingdale’s translation.

²⁰ Emphasis at the end mine. The translation of this earlier draft is G. Handwerk’s, in Nietzsche (2012), p. 507, note 305.

them. Nietzsche insists a number of times on the proverbial idea that necessity, and not freedom, is the mother of invention; in the case of art, invention of new solutions to artistic problems old or new. Against romantic accounts of free and intuitive creation, Nietzsche now argues that added restraints could foster greater mastery.²¹

This text, though it may indicate that Nietzsche has now found a musician he believes could achieve this part of his ideal artistic creation, does not tell us whether he could fit the bill entirely and fulfill the formative function of art with its condition of realism (MOM172). Chopin manages to pull the listener's attention away from the subject matter of his music and towards his artistic mastery, but whether he could, like the poet Goethe, provide models of harmonious life in the contemporary world remains to be seen. The following paragraph (WS160), I believe, provides us with the needed indications:

Chopin's Barcarole. —Almost all conditions and ways of life have a *blissful* moment, and good artists know how to fish it out. Such is possessed even by a life spent beside the beach, a life that unwinds tediously, insalubriously, unhealthily in the proximity of the noisiest and greediest rabble—this blissful moment Chopin has, in his Barcarole, expressed in sounds in such a way that the gods themselves could on hearing it desire to spend long summer evenings lying in a boat.

Chopin's music does not paint the ideal figure of "the great and

²¹ See also the account of the origin of genius in HH231.

beautiful soul” that “embod[ies] itself in the harmonious and well-proportioned and thus acquire[s] visibility” (MOM99), like poetry could. Instead, he “expresse[s] in sounds” a “blissful moment” of the gondolier’s “unhealthy” existence.²² Since music can evoke no more than vague emotional states in the listener, the harmony that it represents must be of a passing kind. It cannot, then, be “monumental” in character like poetry and serve as a model: it can at most evoke a fleeting feeling corresponding to this state of realized harmony, but never to its fashioning in the world.

This does not mean that music is devoid of any formative virtues: the dancing in chains of the musician provides, at what we may call a more “abstract” level, a model of mastery in limitations. It is, in a way, an arbitrary reproduction of the limitations one faces in life. Nevertheless, it cannot provide a concrete model of the same, one that would take into account much of the materials that have to be modelled as well as the modelling itself. What music made by “good artists” communicates is an invitation to this work of self-fashioning through the demonstration of the feeling of bliss that can result from it and which it seems to exemplify. Yet even music can, to an extent, be realistic in Nietzsche’s sense, since it inherits the affective complexion of the modern individual: with the passing of time, it becomes more and more expressive, as affective sensibilities deepen and as it comes to be coupled with more affective content through habit. Despite its limited capacity to express conceptual or

22 The musical form of the barcarolle is meant to mimic the songs of the Venetian gondoliers, as Nietzsche highlights with the imagery he uses to describe the piece.

objectual content, music can point in the direction if not of the contemporary conditions of life, at least to one's affective relationship to them.

In Chopin, this is recognizable, for instance, in the extension of traditional harmony. Nietzsche was likely well aware of this, as made clear by his insistence on Chopin's obedience to rhythmic and melodic tradition²³—that is, most notably, to the regular bar structure of Viennese classicism and to the expressive melodies of bel canto—with no mention of harmony. Chopin anticipated some of Wagner's harmonic innovation, but as opposed to him, he did not seek to reinforce the effects of expressivity at the expense of form: on the contrary, he maintained a rigorous logic in his compositions that prevented this.²⁴ In particular, he used ambiguity in a way that allowed him both to maximize expression and to draw attention to the process of harmonic interpretation rather than to the music's expressive effect. Instead of resolving it almost immediately, as the Viennese classics, or to have it persist insistently like Wagner, he integrated tonal ambiguity in the rigorously organized fabric of his works. He often presents, in the words of the musicologist Eduard Cone (1995, p. 144), “a contrast, however brief, between possible interpretations, or between one interpretation and a subsequent reinterpretation.” In this coexistence of multiple perspectives, none of which appears to have a privileged role over the others, the listener is presented with a parallel to the process of a fashioning of the self,

23 In WS159, quoted at the beginning of this section.

24 See 1878, 28[47] (KSA 8, p. 510)

of trying different configurations to accommodate in an harmonious whole what immovable elements one has to navigate around (MOM174).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, two complementary aspects mark Nietzsche's demands on artistic creation at the time of *Human, All Too Human* and its two supplements: one of mastery, which the expression "dance in chains" illustrates; and one of realism, of a relating to some of the actual content of human existence. This echoes the dual "artist's metaphysics" of *Birth of Tragedy* in a number of ways, but the aim differs: the expression of content is no longer the purpose of the work of art, but rather the fashioning of the given. As such, musical expressivity is placed in a difficult position: it is both, as the means by which music is provided with a certain affective content, an advantage and a risk: it can elevate music by allowing it to attain a certain realism, but it can also drive its public away from reality by reinforcing false representations on music's powers, or by encouraging its public's escapism. Ever the music enthusiast, Nietzsche continued to reflect on music's possibilities, but he eventually had to come to the conclusion that it could only imperfectly satisfy what he saw as art's highest goals. Despite these shortcomings, he found in Chopin a musician that did the most that was possible for music, who could combine the greatest expressivity with a solid sense of form, and who demonstrated great artistic mastery rather than baroque deformity and excess of effect. In this,

though, Chopin stayed short of poetry: in the end, he could be no Goethe.

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