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Romanticism/anti-romanticism

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Introduction

Like most other accounts of musical romanticism, this chapter centres on German thinkers and composers. It is not a comprehensive, descriptive overview of romantic music, but rather a narrative of how romantic ideology affected musical aesthetics over the course of the nineteenth century. It proceeds hermeneutically rather than empirically, attempting to define a romantic *understanding* of music rather than cobbling together a definition from musical characteristics of individual works. Let us orient ourselves within the vast literature on romanticism around three basic points. The first is the special relationship between music and romanticism, well expressed in Nietzsche's words: 'I fear I am too much of a musician not to be a Romantic' (1921, 335).

We can move directly from this conflation of music and romanticism to our second point, which can be seen as a reaction, an interrogation of the first: surely not all music is romantic? A chronological juxtaposition only muddies the waters; romantic theories of music, which arise in the 1790s, do not coincide with the nineteenth-century repertoire commonly referred to as 'romantic'. While musicologists divide the music of that century into early and late romantic periods, placing the dividing line around 1850, scholars of German literature distinguish a 'Jena romanticism', occurring around 1794–1808, from a literary late romanticism that flourished during the first two decades of the nineteenth century (Prawer 1970). In contrast, composers of the so-called 'romantic generation' in music, which includes Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Wagner and Chopin, were all born around 1810, after literary romanticism had reached its peak (Dahlhaus 1988; Eggebrecht 1996: 590).

An appreciation of this chronological disjunction is necessary for my third point: romanticism is not merely a neutral descriptive term; it is a stance or position taken by those who were either very strongly for or against it. Therefore, anti-romanticism has had a major role in defining romanticism.

For purposes of understanding romantic ideology, I will turn to an earlier generation, the poets and philosophers born around 1770 in Germany. These creative men and women reacted strongly against the Enlightenment's belief in the rational design of a better world. Their most radical and anarchic response to the modernization and rationalization of society was proclaimed in the first decade of the nineteenth century by August and Friedrich Schlegel, Schelling and Novalis. However, the aesthetic writings of this 'Jena circle' centred primarily on literature, leaving it to Tieck, Wackenroder and E. T. A. Hoffmann to adumbrate a concept of musical romanticism.

Weimar Classicism, especially as expressed by Goethe, and the aesthetics of Hegel form the counterpart to this particular romanticism. These thinkers were the first to define romanticism in opposition to classicism and to draw the analogy of sickness as opposed to health. They thus inaugurated the polemical discourse that defines romanticism and also indicates how strongly it has always functioned as a value judgement. As Carl Schmitt, himself an important critic of romanticism, remarked, 'The easiest thing to do would still be to follow Stendhal and simply say that romantic is what is interesting and the classical is what is boring, or naturally the other way around' (Schmitt 1991, 4). By designating something as romantic, a critic often reveals ethical, political or moral values rather than strictly aesthetic concerns.

These three points – the special bond between music and romanticism, the vagueness of a chronological definition and the value judgement implicit in defining the 'romantic' content of an artwork – go a long way towards explaining why it is so hard to pin down musical romanticism. Musicologists place its beginnings anywhere from 1780 to 1830 and often see it persisting well into the twentieth century (Samson 2001). For instance, a reader turning to Richard Taruskin's comprehensive history of Western classical music can find romanticism invoked for music as early as Mozart and as late as Schoenberg (Taruskin 2005). Such an expansive view leads observers like Dieter Borchmeyer to complain about 'the musical concept of romanticism, which denotes everything and nothing . . . and is applied to the entire development of music from Franz Schubert to Richard Strauss, and so, ultimately, does not mean anything at all' (Borchmeyer 1994, 40).

In response, rather than concentrating on defining the chronological boundaries of romanticism, we need also to fill in the comparatively neglected history of anti-romanticism. This reveals a different picture: a history of music over the last two hundred years that can be seen as cyclic. Instead of an undifferentiated 'romantic period', we observe a series of waves of romanticism, separated by periods of vehement reaction that also ebb away. After the first romantic era and a backlash to it around 1850, a second wave of romanticism, or 'neo-romanticism', lasts until the First World War. The following period of anti-romanticism reaches its peak in the 1920s. The cycle repeats once more, with the period after the Second World War marking the most extreme version of anti-romanticism to date. From the current standpoint of the early twenty-first century, it appears that, despite repeated attempts to kill it off, musical romanticism lives on.

A detailed description of this history is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, I will illustrate this premise by discussing romanticism and anti-romanticism in their primary locus, the nineteenth or so-called 'romantic' century. I will also comment upon the question of the persistence of romanticism and anti-romanticism in the musical modernism of the early twentieth century. In the following section I will characterize the main themes of romantic ideology within the framework of modern society and how they are manifested in music.

Romantic ideology in the first half of the nineteenth century: the dualistic mindset

Real life versus art

Our current understanding of early romanticism has been tremendously influenced by the critical theory of The Frankfurt School, a twentieth-century version of the dialectic method of Hegel and the ideology critique of Karl Marx (Kohlenbach 2009). For instance, Georg Lukács used the term 'Romantic anti-capitalism' to emphasize Romantic thinkers' negative reaction to their

specific economic and social circumstances, and to the increasingly competitive, market-oriented mentality that they perceived (Sayre and Löwy 1984). By responding to the increased differentiation of society and its consequent alienating effects, the Romantics took not only an anti-capitalistic position but also a more comprehensive anti-modern stance. From this point of view, romanticism is fundamentally about the relationship between art and life. They recognized that the aesthetic now functioned as a privileged sphere within modernity; that the realm of art had taken on the role of serving as the last refuge where one could experience the unity that was denied in a functionally differentiated society. They argued that the potential of art was being extinguished by its integration into this society, since it thereby functioned as a compensatory realm in cooperation with other spheres of work and society. As Horkheimer and Adorono put it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: '[Art] is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again' (1972, 137).

The Romantics wanted to produce art that would not allow it to be used as compensation but instead give an idea of what life might be like outside the structure of society itself. They saw the aesthetic dimension as the way to access a higher truth, an alternate but just as legitimate reality. Consequently, romanticism is marked by dualism, the portrayal of the 'real' world and the imagined alternative. Of all the writers of this time, E. T. A. Hoffmann was the most vehement in depicting the 'horribly infuriating contrast' between the banalities of music making in polite society and his personal experience of music as overwhelming and indescribable. Perhaps more than any other romantic artist, E. T. A. Hoffmann lived the double life he portrayed in his writings. He was never able to decide in favour of the poetic or the prosaic world; he felt compelled to live in both (Safranski 1992).

Rationality versus irrationality

The philosophical tradition that considers music as dangerously irrational goes back to Plato. The Romantics challenged the assumption that knowledge is acquired only through rationality, mind and thought. They wanted to explore more subjective routes, through the senses and the emotions. They felt that the Enlightenment had dismissed supernatural, mystical, dark forces too quickly. One could say that they opened themselves up to both 'normal' thought and 'pathological' thought, as described by Claude Lévi-Strauss: 'normal thought continually seeks the meaning of things which refuse to reveal their significance. So-called pathological thought, on the other hand, overflows with emotional interpretations and overtones, in order to supplement an otherwise deficient reality' (quoted in Prawer 1970, 5).

The philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, in his lectures on the Aesthetics of Art, aimed to counter the influence of romantic aesthetics. Consistent with Hegel's general dialectical approach, his aesthetics presents a broadly historical narrative of three stages: symbolic, classical and romantic. The middle Classical age is equated with the Ancient Greeks, who stand for moderation, beauty and serenity; they attain the perfect balance of content and form. The subsequent Romantic age ends with Hegel's own time period. The balance has shifted away from outward form and toward subjective inwardness. For Hegel, who was not a musician, music was the most extreme example of this imbalance between form and content. He described it as 'sounds, as if they were feeling without thought,' and 'expression without any externality at all.' As such, music exemplified romanticism more than any other art (Pederson 1996). The twentieth-century term 'logocentrism,' which refers to an ideology that equates words with thoughts, is pertinent here. Hegel's logocentric

assumptions made it difficult for him to imagine that music could contain thought. Even if thought were somehow involved in music, Hegel viewed it as naturally subsidiary to subjective feelings.

The fundamental basis for Hegel's qualms about music was his difficulty with romantic art in general. Romanticism, for Hegel, signalled the end of art as the bearer of Spirit. The next stages for the Spirit were to be manifested in ways that were increasingly purified of materiality: in religion and ultimately philosophy.

Hegel's stature as a philosopher and his enduring influence have ensured that later critics continue to struggle with the questions posed by his critique of music. His elaborate philosophical framework does not need to be accepted or even understood to consider his fundamental assumptions about music as a romantic art. First, he distinguished feeling and thought as two completely separate processes. Second, he characterized music as subjective feeling without thought. That this was a negative value judgement was self-evident to him. Romantic aesthetics counters by asking: what is wrong with subjective feeling in *art*? Isn't art by definition subjective? Doesn't its value lie precisely in its aesthetic dimension, which imparts that which cannot be expressed abstractly or objectively?

The Marble Statue

Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff's literary fairy tale, 'The Marble Statue' ('Das Marmorbild', 1819) is a crucial example for scholars who deal with music and romanticism. From a literary perspective, Eichendorff is a latecomer to romanticism; his writings appear after the most radical ideas of the early romantics had proved unsustainable (Looth 2009, 80). 'Late' Romanticism is usually identified by its subject matter as well as a more conservative ideology. Eichendorff's lyrical and narrative writings take place in vaguely medieval times, in a pre-modern society; the action usually occurs outdoors in a beautiful natural landscape of trees, flowers and birds. His narratives involve the pull of dark supernatural forces that are countered by Catholic Christianity. 'The Marble Statue' remains a favourite for literary analysis because of its ambivalence about these forces: while the 'moral' of the story is clear enough – the hero prevails – there is a remarkable blurring of seemingly stark binary oppositions (Hamilton 2009).

Eichendorff typically portrayed two kinds of music in his stories and poetry: the music of dissolution, involving a loss of control, a loss of self; and the music of containment, which brings desires under control and helps define a character as an individual. 'The Marble Statue' pits these two kinds of music against each other. The story opens with the young protagonist Florio on the road, although he literally does not know where he is going or what he wants to do with his life. Innocent, vulnerable and emotional, he finds an outlet in song. There are nine songs interspersed in 'The Marble Statue,' making up about 16 per cent of the entire text (Hanss 1989, 23). Florio is easily drawn into a state of intoxication by the music of a beautiful, mysterious woman. However, at the crucial moment when Florio is about to 'lose himself' to her, he suddenly hears 'an old song of pious bent, one he had often heard in his childhood and had since nearly forgotten, with all the varied experiences and sights of his journey' (Eichendorff 1983, 161). This song brings Florio 'back to himself' and the woman turns into a statue of Venus. Florio thus resists the seduction by the Greek goddess of love; at the end of the story he finds himself riding away with the pure young girl 'Bianca' and her father, symbolically on the path to integration and containment within the conventions of family and religion.

Although the opposites are presented so clearly, with characters' names hardly more than designations of their symbolic function, Eichendorff complicates the picture by also portraying them as doubles. For instance, Venus is the opposite of the 'white' Bianca, but Venus is also described as white: she rides a white horse, wears a white veil, and ultimately becomes a white marble statue. Florio has difficulty at times telling Bianca and Venus apart.

The story has other thematic elements that are easily distinguished in many romantic musical works: nature and beauty, love and death, supernatural events and altered states of consciousness. Perhaps Florio's most remarkable quality is the questionable state of his consciousness at any given time. His perceptions are frequently described in the subjunctive mode ('it *seemed* that', 'it was *as if*'). Objective cognition is affected by his emotions, which are always close to the surface. His point of view is so erratic that the whole story takes on the irrational quality of a dream. Not only are his experiences described in a dream-like manner, Eichendorff also recounts his actual dreams. Other characters are frequently described as 'lost in thought', not fully present or conscious, as well. The attention given to such 'altered states' is a hallmark of romanticism.

Schumann's Liederkreis, Op. 38

'The Marble Statue' helps us identify the romantic aspects of Robert Schumann's setting of twelve selected poems by Eichendorff in his *Liederkreis*, Op. 38, of 1840. These poems were selected by Schumann from various sections of the 1837 edition of Eichendorff's poems; they were neither in the same order nor grouped together by the author. Schumann's himself asserted, 'the cycle is my most Romantic ever' (quoted in Thym 2004: 122). It appears initially that Schumann did not so much assemble a story as emphasize recurrent romantic themes of nature, darkness, loneliness and alienation, love and longing. However, the extensive secondary literature on this cycle has analysed its musical structure and unity, and familiarity with the narrative of 'The Marble Statue' helps fill in the gaps (Brinkmann *et al.* 1997; Ferris 2000). A basic emotional trajectory lends the work the sense of a story. Threats and dangers are depicted along the way, but the cycle ends happily with the beloved. Schumann also chooses poems reminiscent of the fairytale setting of 'The Marble Statue'. There is a wooded landscape in nine of the twelve poems. 'Mondnacht', 'Zwielicht' and 'Frühlingsnacht' all take place in darkness. The first and eighth songs, both called 'In der Fremde', emphasize alienation or unfamiliar surroundings; the sixth song's title is 'Schöne Fremde'.

Eichendorff was primarily a lyrical poet. In 'The Marble Statue' as well as the poems of the *Liederkreis*, descriptions of nature use onomatopoeia and invoke 'natural music': leaves rustling, birds singing and water rushing. As one commentator puts it: 'A key word for Eichendorff is 'lauschen', meaning an intent, almost devout, listening, and it is answered by 'rauschen', a word that covers a greater range of sounds that any English word can, but denotes, as in the poem 'Lockung' ('Lure'), the sensual rustling of the natural world' (Looth 2009: 79). This 'rauschen' of nature, which appears in seven of the twelve songs by Schumann, will resurface in Nietzsche's later romantic celebration of the 'Rausch' of a Dionysian musical experience.

Tannhäuser

'The Marble Statue' also illuminates significant romantic aspects of Richard Wagner's 'grosse romantische Oper', *Tannhäuser* (1845). One of the sources for Wagner's opera was the

Tannhäuser saga in the 1806 collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*; Eichendorff almost certainly knew this saga and incorporated features of it into 'The Marble Statue' (Hanss 1989: 14). Therefore, there are similarities between Wagner's opera and Eichendorff's story because they have a common source. However, there are deeper connections. Like the story, the opera is based on a stark dualism that is subtly undermined. Tannhäuser is an artist who is seduced by Venus, and unlike Florio, succumbs. However, he escapes Venus in Act I by calling out to the Virgin Mary. While Florio experiences a rite of passage and emerges 'reborn', Tannhäuser is torn apart by his inner turmoil; unable to live with himself, he dies, albeit redeemed by the saintly Elisabeth.

Musically, the dichotomy is presented at the outset in the Overture: chorale-style music that is steady, predictable and traditional. The music of the Venusburg that follows is free flowing, chromatic and more colourfully orchestrated. Musical keys are also used symbolically to reinforce the opposition. The opera begins in E major with Venus in possession and ends in E♭ major, with the redemption of Tannhäuser by Elisabeth. The two keys are audibly juxtaposed in the song contest, when Wolfram's courtly love song is interrupted by Tannhäuser's praise of Venus and physical pleasure.

Although the portrayal of the powers in play is undeniably schematic, upon closer inspection *Tannhäuser* can be seen to manifest an ambivalence that blurs the division between good and evil (Dahlhaus 1979a: 25–7). Like 'The Marble Statue', the opposites also sometimes become doubles. In performance, the roles of Venus and Elisabeth are frequently performed by the same singer. Another way that Wagner departs from a strict bifurcation of good and evil is the presence of a third kind of music, 'natural' music. In Act One after being returned to the 'real' world, Tannhäuser experiences several extraordinary minutes of 'natural', 'diegetic' music, i.e. music that one could encounter in the real world, not in the theatre, but also sounds not made by humans (Abbate 2001, 123–5). The orchestra (the extra-diegetic 'soundtrack') is silent as a shepherd sings and plays his pipe, which overlaps with singing pilgrims passing by as they make their way to Rome. The only accompaniment is the sound of cows shaking their cowbells. In this opera about music, 'natural' music is portrayed and described; for instance, Tannhäuser's first speech recalls church bells. This spontaneous music represents something different from the artful songs by Tannhäuser and his fellow musicians. The presence of a third, natural realm, set off against the supernatural realm of Venus and the realm of social convention represented by Elisabeth, lends some ambiguity to Wagner's message.

More romantic oppositions

Masculine versus feminine

Following a basic assumption of modernity, the real, rational world for Eichendorff is a world of men, while the irrational, subjective sphere is the domain of woman. Venus is not just a woman; she is eroticism incarnate and the supreme possessor of the power of sexual seduction. Florio is attracted by her beauty, but also by her music making. When her power over him is broken, he recognizes that she is dangerous and evil. Tannhäuser's relationship with Venus goes further than Florio's. She expands his horizons not only with regard to pleasure but also in respect to his musical creativity, since he now has first-hand experience with the love he sings about.

Christianity versus the supernatural

Religion is treated as a field of struggle between forces of Christianity and pagan gods from Greek mythology, or supernatural forces associated with evil, the Devil. In the 'Marble Statue', a specifically Catholic Christianity is referenced by the descriptions of Bianca as a Madonna. Her rival is the Goddess of Love herself, Venus. This opposition serves to articulate Florio's warring attractions towards nature versus culture: safety and containment versus danger and dissolution. Tannhäuser is faced with the same choices. In Wagner's opera, Catholicism takes the stage when the pilgrims pass by, making their way to Rome. Pagan myths are given their scene at the beginning with nymphs, sirens and bacchantes running wild. Venus again represents the danger of losing oneself: Tannhäuser literally disappears from his companions during his time in the Venusberg. As we shall see, Wagner's last opera *Parsifal* also thematizes the pull of a supernatural, seductive world on the knights, whose Christianity is depicted through their celebration of the sacraments.

The first wave of anti-romanticism

The philosophical critique of Romanticism stems primarily from socio-political considerations. Romanticism, in the view of these critics, shirks responsibility for improving real life by escaping into an alternative world. Analogously, music is understood as a rejection of rational language in favour of the enjoyment of beautiful sounds. Music unleashes emotions, which can hinder the pursuit of the ongoing goals of improving the mind through education and understanding others' point of view. This kind of anti-romanticism either attempts to minimize music's power or wants to add a political dimension to music.

The years around the 1848 revolutions marked the first groundswell of anti-romantic sentiment in music criticism (Pederson 1996; Garratt 2010). Those who called for a realistic politically engaged music directly addressed the question of whether music was inseparable from romanticism. One radical proposal was to create a new kind of democratic music through democratic procedures. Another solution, at the other end of the political spectrum, advised a return to classicism. However, after the failure of the revolutions in Europe in 1848–9, plans for the future of music similarly collapsed. Eventually, two main attitudes emerged to address the anti-romantic critique. The first did not dispute that music was romantic and that it drew forth a response that was primarily emotional; realistic content could be introduced, however, by supplementing music with words and ideas. The contrasting attitude disputed the restriction of music's content to moods and feelings, and argued that art music also embodied structures that needed to be perceived intellectually.

Richard Wagner adopted the former stance in his Zurich writings from 1849 to 1852. His solution was not to question music's essentially romantic nature, but to supplement it with what it lacked, namely, ideas and political engagement. His presentation of this argument was laid out most fully in his 1851 treatise *Opera and Drama*. Yes, music is only emotion, he declared, and opera needs more than that to be intellectually and philosophically viable. Wagner's Zurich writings as a whole are the most extended anti-romantic polemic against music in the nineteenth century.

Eduard Hanslick's famous book *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854) exemplifies the other response to anti-romanticism. He repeatedly and emphatically insisted that when we are discussing music, we are *not* talking about feelings: 'feeling is nothing more than a secondary

effect' (1854: 5). As proof he pointed out that 'the connection between a piece of music and our changes of feeling is not at all one of strict causation; the piece changes our mood according to our changing musical experiences and impressions' (1854: 6).

Since they considered themselves enemies, it can be confusing to see similarities in the arguments of Wagner and Hanslick. However, in the 1850s, they were more in agreement than they realized. They both attempted to defend music while accepting the binary oppositions (rational/irrational, thought/feeling, masculine/feminine) that situated music in a negative space.

Hanslick's most notorious and emotionally charged chapter, on what he called 'pathological listening', repeats charges against music that had been introduced by politically committed, anti-romantic writers before the revolutions. He condemned the pleasurable response to music as 'elemental' – that is, as an undeniably powerful but uncivilized and uncontrolled release of emotion. He located habits of pathological listening in historically primitive cultures, savages in faraway places such as 'the South Seas' and in music enthusiasts who used music as a drug for physical pleasure. To counter this, he proposed that 'contemplative hearing is the only artistic, true form; the raw emotion of savages and the gushing of the music enthusiast can be lumped together in a single category contrary to it' (1854, 63). His description of contemplative hearing was less detailed and did not go much further than calling for an alert mind that appreciated music for its own sake, that took in its beauty by contemplation of 'sounding forms in motion'. He insisted, however, that contemplative listening, along with a scientific approach to the music itself and not our response to it, would ward off 'the oldest accusation against music: that it enervates us, makes us flabby, causes us to languish' (1854, 61).

Orfeé aux enfers

Polemical anti-romanticism could be expressed in music as well as in music criticism. Jacques Offenbach's creation of *opéra bouffe* in the 1850s can be seen as such a musical critique, from an angle that could be called neoclassical as much as anti-romantic. Rossini recognized this classical aspect in dubbing Offenbach the 'Mozart of the Champs Elysées' and Offenbach himself claimed kinship with composers of French *opéra comique c*. 1760–80, especially Grétry (Everist 2009, 72–98). The writer Max Nordau also associated him with the classical by dubbing him 'The Parisian Aristophanes', referring to the ancient Greek dramatist who specialized in political satire.

One way to see how strongly Offenbach rejected Wagner's approach is to cast a quick glance at the tenets of Wagner's *Opera and Drama* and compare them to Offenbach's practice (Janik 1991, 361–86). Whereas Wagner sought to draw attention away from the music itself, Offenbach specialized in catchy tunes that could take on a life of their own outside the dramatic setting. Wagner banned chorus and ensembles because they detracted from the words. Offenbach's operettas introduced choruses and ensembles purely for the effect of musical variety. While Wagner wanted his audience to be spellbound, to suspend disbelief, Offenbach's musical style calls attention to the artificiality of musical and theatrical conventions, with his parodies of other composers. Wagner's theory of 'Stabreim' or 'Versmelodie' resulted in long passages of alliteration, sometimes unintentionally comical. Offenbach's operettas, in contrast, openly delighted in childish word play, including onomatopoeia and vocalizations, such as the imitation of flies buzzing in *Orfeé aux enfers*. Other famous examples include Hélène's identification of 'L'homme à la pomme' in *La belle Hélène*, a silly-sounding phrase repeated in mock dramatic

style, and the militaristic General Boum's introduction of himself with words imitating gun fire, a 'piff, paff, pouf, et tara, pa pa poum' in *La Grand-Duchesse de Gérolstein.*

Offenbach flouts Wagner's serious and ambitious prescriptions most explicitly in his choice of subject matter. Whereas Wagner's requirement for opera to be philosophically important meant that it should be based on myths, relevant for all times and places, Offenbach adapted myths to his time period in order to satirize both antiquity and contemporary society. A comparison of Offenbach's breakthrough work, *Orfeé aux enfers* (1858) with *Tannhäuser* highlights some striking similarities and significant differences. One scholar has argued that in the 1861 revision Wagner intentionally made associations between Tannhäuser and the Orpheus myth in the opening tableau (Revard 2009). Both Orpheus and Tannhäuser are legendary musicians. Eurydice is dubbed in the operetta the 'image of Venus'. Unlike Venus, however, Eurydice does not find her lover's music seductive. Rather than a god-given power, Orpheus's music making is nothing more than the job he goes to every day. Orpheus and Eurydice agree to split up in order to pursue extramarital affairs. In contrast, Tannhäuser breaks with Venus in order to recover his moral and religious integrity. Both works depict a bacchanale: it functions as the finale for *Orfeé* and the opening scene for *Tannhäuser*. In *Orfeé*, the destination is hell because heaven is boring and the gods want to try spicy food, wine and orgies. *Tannhäuser* begins in the Venusburg where a bacchanale is underway, but the hero is already tired of the sensual pleasures on offer and can hardly wait to leave.

Wagner provided a detailed description of the bacchanale for the 1861 Paris ballet version:

> From the far background a train of Bacchantes approach, who rush in among the pairs of lovers, inviting them to wild delights. By gestures of rapturous intoxication the Bacchantes excite the lovers to increasing license. The revelers rush together with ardent love-embraces. Satyrs and Fauns have appeared from the rocky clefts and now force themselves in their dance between the Bacchantes and the pairs of lovers.
>
> (Wagner 1916, 414)

Wagner represents the erotic frenzy and bliss musically by using extremes of orchestral colour, texture and harmony. In contrast, the description of *Orfeé*'s Fourth Tableau (finale) specifies merely: 'The Underworld. As the curtain rises, all the gods of Olympus and the Underworld are gathered round a table. They are crowned with flowers and are drinking. Bacchanale' (Crémieux 1936). Eurydice's Hymn to Bacchus is set as a bouncy, cheerful strophic song with a chorus, sung by a coloratura soprano. The bacchanale culminates in the energetic cancan: a duple metre kick-step, regular phrasing, simple harmonic progressionsand infectiously repetitive tune.

Neo-romanticism

In the second half of the nineteenth century, romanticism took on a new lease on life as a consequence of the failure of the 1848 revolutions throughout Europe. The resulting defeatist attitude about making the world a better place easily crossed over into a desire to escape from reality into a subjective, inner world of feelings. This neo-romanticism acquired philosophical legitimacy in the 1850s with the discovery of Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy of will and his evaluation of music as the highest of the arts that had been originally published in 1819. Musical metaphysics in the later nineteenth century were inevitably coloured by

Schopenhauer's philosophy, as filtered through the writings and music of Wagner. In 1854, after he had closed out the series of his politically engaged Zurich essays (1849–52), Wagner first encountered Schopenhauer's writings. They became critically important to his artistic and philosophical development because they enabled him to break out of his anti-romantic view of music. Although the political and philosophical critiques of romanticism had certainly not been refuted, they receded enough in importance to allow a resurgence of musical romanticism, or as Carl Dahlhaus called it, 'neo-romanticism' (1979b). Schopenhauer also influenced the writings, as well as the music, of composers whom Dahlhaus would call modernist. This is perhaps because Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg and others were all centrally engaged with Wagner.

What was it about Schopenhauer's writings that made them so relevant to musical thought after 1850, decades after they were written? Naturally, composers would have been attracted to his claim that music was the highest of the arts, but Schopenhauer went far beyond this, asserting that music was on such a different level that literally nothing else in the world could compare to it.

> Music differs from all the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of the phenomenon, or, more exactly, of the will's adequate objectivity, but is directly a copy of the will itself, and therefore expresses the metaphysical to everything physical in the world, the thing-in-itself to every phenomenon. Accordingly, we could just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will.
>
> (1966, Vol. 1, 262–3)

These claims for music exactly fitted the cultural mood after 1850; the very aspect of music that had traditionally been seen as problematic, its inability to represent through pictures or words, came to be exalted, as the quality that made it superior to mere representation of the world. Instead of trying to change society, artists could escape into a philosophically defensible alternative world through music.

Another particular passage in *The World as Will and Representation* transfixed composers in the later nineteenth century:

> The composer reveals the innermost nature of the world, and expresses the profoundest wisdom in a language that his reasoning faculty does not understand, just as a magnetic somnambulist gives information about things of which she has no conception when she is awake.
>
> (1966, Vol. 1, 260)

Wagner quoted this sentence in 1870 in his long essay, 'Beethoven'. It also appears in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872. Mahler referred to it in his letters and it plays a key role in the argument presented by Schoenberg in his famous 1912 essay, 'The Relationship to the Text' (1975, 141–5).

Composers must have found this passage so compelling because, first, it told them that musical creation revealed the innermost nature of the world. Music does not merely express beauty or feelings; it expresses the profoundest wisdom. Second, this creative process is not a conscious act, but rather something that occurs in an alternative state of consciousness, akin to being put to sleep by being 'magnetized'. Perhaps anxious to maintain their authority against

the emerging disciplines of musicology and music theory, composers were attracted to a view of music as not something that can be theorized, analysed or evaluated by the reasoning faculty. Schopenhauer's description confers on the composer the importance that can hardly be claimed by any other kind of person and relieves the composer of having to account for his importance, because there is no way his music can be rationally explicated.

Tristan und Isolde

Schopenhauer's theory of music as the most direct human experience influenced Wagner's changing understanding of how opera comes into being. He now proposed that dramatic action was just a surface manifestation generated by music as emotion. Wagner thus directly challenged the Hegelian framework that put thought before feeling: feeling is now privileged as the origin, that which compels thoughts and action. In his 1860 essay 'The Music of the Future', Wagner pronounced that in *Tristan und Isolde*,

> Life and death, the whole signification and existence of the external world, in this work depend entirely on the emotions of the soul. The whole affecting action becomes prominent only because it is demanded by the innermost sentiment and comes to light as it has been prepared in the depths of the soul.

(1873, 40)

We might conclude that because of this inner emotional origin, not much takes place on stage in *Tristan* – in terms of duration, the 'action' sequences (sword fights at the end of the second and third acts) take only a few minutes, while the remaining four hours or so of the opera involves working through the characters' feelings through monologues, confrontations and discussions.

Tristan is romantic in other ways as well. All of these discussions of inner states concern love and death and other familiar romantic binary oppositions. The real world versus the alternative world is musically and verbally depicted as literally the difference between night and day. The most traditional romantic imagery occurs at the beginning of the Act Two: King Marke's hunt is the occasion for off-stage horns making hunting calls, an effect Wagner also used in *Tannhäuser*. There is a reference to the 'natural' music of a water fountain and Isolde attributes her situation to the goddess of love, named 'Frau Minne' in the German medieval version. Even the supernatural plays a role in the plot, with the drinking of the 'magic' love potion.

The dualistic framework of *Tristan* is just as strong as in *Tannhäuser* (love/death, day/night, public/private), but Wagner musically undermines these oppositions with a more sophisticated treatment that continues to elude definitive interpretation. One example is the vision/light metaphor in the libretto and its corresponding leitmotif in the music. Although the 'day' leitmotif obviously stands for the real world, it appears in other contexts that prevent us from understanding it so simplistically. *Tristan und Isolde* also departs from some of the regular devices of earlier romantic writings and from *Tannhäuser*. The power of music is not a theme here; no singing contest or artists are involved. Perhaps most exceptionally among all of Wagner operas, in *Tristan* redemption is not found in woman or religion, but rather in sexual love between man and woman.

The radically new aspects of both the music and the libretto of *Tristan und Isolde* can be traced to Wagner's understanding of Schopenhauer's pessimistic theory of the will (Chafe 2005). As Schopenhauer described it,

> The nature of man consists in the fact that his will strives, is satisfied, strives anew, and so on and on; in fact his happiness and well being consist only in the transition from desire to satisfaction . . .. Corresponding to this, the nature of melody is a constant digression and deviation from the keynote in a thousand ways . . .. in all these ways, melody expresses the many different forms of the will's efforts, but also its satisfaction by ultimately finding again a harmonious interval, and still more the keynote.
>
> (1966, Vol. 1: 260)

Here Schopenhauer equates musical cadence with satisfaction of desire or the will, so a musical composition that mirrors life should never end, just as desires never ends until death (Bowie 2009: 247–9). Wagner's imaginative musical portrayal of the will in the form of sexual arousal constitutes the 'sound world' of *Tristan*.

Wagner also puts into practice Schopenhauer's theory that music can represent more directly than any other medium extreme mental and physical states. Especially in the Third Act, Tristan's final stages of life are portrayed in music: going in and out of consciousness, delirium, hallucination, heart beats. Tristan's music begins with reminiscences from Act Two, perhaps representing an unconscious dream state that re-enacts his momentous coming together with Isolde and his terrible loss of King Marke's trust. Tristan refers to his time in another world (unconsciousness) to the point of 'Urvergessen' (total lack of consciousness of the real world); this is audibly depicted as a move to a remote key, here D major, and a soft-as-possible dynamic marking (*ppp*). After a moment of almost silence, however, the desire motive (at 'Wie schwand mir seine Ahnung?') returns for first time in this act; this leads to a build-up of chromaticism and the music returns to full strength until Tristan collapses ('Das Licht, wann löscht es aus?'). The delirium that follows (at 'Das Schiff! Das Schiff! Dort streicht es am Riff! Siehst du es nicht?') momentarily retreats into another dreamlike reminiscence section ('Muss ich dich so versteh'n, du alte, ernste Weise') and a slow intensification of all parameters, until he imagines himself blinded and burned by the sun ('O dieser Sonne sengender Strahl'). A second collapse (at 'Verflucht, wer dich gebraut!') is followed by an ominous silence ('was je Minne sich gewinnt') where Kurwenal believes that Tristan has died, and then the resumption of a heartbeat as the desire motif finally returns ('O Wonne, nein').

Finally, Tristan's next monologue, a full hallucination ('Und drauf Isolde'), is portrayed in a distinctly different way than the previous two states of altered consciousness. Rather than steadily increasing in intensity, Wagner keeps the music slow and regular, but somehow eerily unmoored through orchestration and tonality, until Tristan turns from a hallucinatory vision of Isolde ('Ach Isolde, Isolde, wie schön bist du') back to Kurwenal. The importance of this opera and the third act in particular cannot be underestimated as a source of inspiration for Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*.

Nietzsche

Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872), heavily influenced by Schopenhauer and Wagner, presents some of the familiar themes of romanticism, such as the rejection of the 'real' world in favour of a fascination with dreams, intoxication and music. What Nietzsche added to the mix was a characterization of modernity as the fatal embrace of scientific, rational thought. Nietzsche put all his hopes in the Dionysian force of music, specifically Wagner's operas, to overcome modernity. *The Birth of Tragedy* is based on the assumption of

the downfall of civilization due to fragmentation of the individual, which itself was not a new idea but central to the German concept of *Bildung*. He attacked the standard narrative, however, by locating the 'perfect' era (i.e. before the fall) in archaic Greece up to the middle of the 5th century BC, which he deemed an aesthetic culture. For Nietzsche, the downfall began with the period that had hitherto been considered the peak of Hellenic achievement, the period of Euripides and Socrates. Socrates is scandalously portrayed as the beginning of the fatal 'disenchantment of the world' – initiating an unhealthy, overly intellectual approach to the central questions about the meaning of life.

Rather than Socrates, Nietzsche chooses Dionysus as his hero. Dionysus, the son of Zeus and the mortal woman Semele, was the god of wine, worshipped by female followers known as Bacchantes and male followers including satyrs (half-man, half-goat). Worshipping Dionysus through music making and dancing resulted in frenzied intoxication, *Rausch*. For Nietzsche, the significance of *Rausch* went far beyond pleasure. It dissolves the individual identity, which involves unbearable pleasure and pain. It is made bearable through representation. In the 6th century BC in Athens, festivals of Dionysus featured hymns called dithyrambs, which had originally been sung and danced by choruses of men disguised as satyrs, wearing masks and goatskins. These hymns had been performed in a circular area called orchestra (literally, 'dancing place'), and in about 535 BC a dramatic aspect was added to this choral performance by an Athenian named Thespis, the 'father of the drama'; in this sense one can say that theatre was born out of the cult of Dionysus (Hatab 2001).

Nietzsche identified Dionysus with a fundamental irrationality essential to art: 'that destructive, primitively anarchic forces are part of us (not to be projected into some diabolical Other), and that the pleasure we take in them is real and not to be denied' (Geuss 1999: 00). He claimed that in his time, only music still had a connection to Dionysus, as it had not yet succumbed to science:

> Out of the Dionysian root of the German spirit a power has arisen which, having nothing in common with the primitive conditions of Socratic culture, can neither be explained nor excused by it, but which is rather felt by this culture as something terribly inexplicable and overwhelmingly hostile – German music as we must understand it, particularly in its vast solar orbit from Bach to Beethoven, from Beethoven to Wagner.
>
> (Geuss 1999: 119)

Nietzsche further argued that Wagner's music—specifically *Tristan und Isolde*—drew upon the same *Rausch* as the forces that had brought Ancient Greek tragedy into being. This musical polemic mystified and outraged his philological colleagues, who could only understand it as inappropriate and off-topic. After its publication, Nietzsche's career in philology was effectively over before it even began.

In the following decade, Nietzsche resigned his position, became alienated from Wagner, and repeatedly announced that he had turned against romanticism (Del Caro 1989). His Preface to the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, entitled 'An Attempt at Self-criticism', excoriated his first book as embarrassingly romantic. Indeed, the Preface explicitly contradicts his own book and warns against

> current *German music*, which is Romanticism through and through and the most un-Greek of all possible forms of art; furthermore, as a ruiner of nerves it is in the first rank, a doubly

dangerous thing amongst a people who love drink and who honour obscurity as a
virtue, particularly for its dual properties as a narcotic which both intoxicates and *befogs*
the mind.

(1999: 10)

Decadence

Nietzsche played a major role in the late nineteenth-century emergence of the concepts of
decadence and degeneration. In the Preface to *The Case of Wagner* (1888) he claimed: 'nothing
has preoccupied me more profoundly than the problem of decadence'. He used the French
word, *décadence*, but associated it mainly with Wagner (Borchmeyer 1983: 632). The relationship
of Nietzsche's accusation of decadence to his earlier critiques of Wagner and romanticism is
difficult. One scholar recently summed up what many have concluded: 'in Nietzsche's conceptual
world and vocabulary, the terms romanticism, pessimism, modernity, and finally decadence are
related in such an intricate fashion that an attempt to define each term in its own right seems
an impossible or even useless enterprise' (Gogröf-Voorhees 1999: 143).

In *The Case of Wagner* the emphasis again is on Wagner as a 'sickness' from which Nietzsche
says he has recovered: 'My greatest experience was a recovery. Wagner is merely one of my
sicknesses' (1967,155). At this late stage in his writing, as the chronically ill forty-four year old
was approaching his final physical and psychological break down, he phrased the issue as a
series of emotionally charged exclamations: 'Is Wagner a human being at all? Isn't he rather a
sickness? He makes sick whatever he touches–he has made music sick' (1967, 164).

Nietzsche presented a provocative alternative to Wagner in the famous first sentence of *The
Case of Wagner*: 'Yesterday I heard—will you believe it? —Bizet's masterpiece for the twentieth
time' (1967, 157). Nietzsche had indeed attended Bizet's *Carmen* several times, but he had also
rediscovered his passion for operetta. He had seen Offenbach's *La belle Hélène* during his
student days and had planned to write an essay on Offenbach back in 1868 (Love 1979). Now
French operetta, especially Offenbach, took on a new significance as the opposite of everything
German, romantic, northern, serious, and turgid. One could argue that his epigraph, '*ridendo
dicere severum*' (through what is laughable, say what is somber) applies better to Offenbach's
satires than Bizet's lurid drama. For Nietzsche, Offenbach also served as a classical alternative
to romanticism. Nietzsche's love for what he called a classical style of music included that of
his friend Heinrich Köselitz, who composed under the name Peter Gast. Although this composer
never achieved success in his own day and has been considered a mediocre talent ever since,
Nietzsche valued him as a light, cheerful antidote to Wagnerian decadence. Nietzsche's enthusiasm
for Gast reached its peak just before his breakdown in 1889. He lavishly praised Gast's opera
Der Löwe von Venedig as Italian music for Germans and compared him favorably to Mozart.

Degeneration

Nietzsche used both decadence and degeneration in his quasi-physiological critique of Wagner's
music. Degeneration can be distinguished as the more 'medical' term, defined as hereditary
mental and physical traits that deviate from the norm. It was used quasi-metaphorically so that
various kinds of social groups and their cultural products could be described in the same
manner as an individual organism. From the perspective of biology, degeneration could be
viewed as atavism – the reversion to origins. It represents a shift from a more spiritual romantic

organicism to the many scientific and quasi-scientific theories of primitive origins that flourished in the nineteenth century. Even music aesthetics was influenced by atavism, adding anthropological theories of an *Urmusik* to its formerly purely historical interest in the origins of music. Pre-linguistic expressive sounds, such as screaming, moaning, sighing, were studied as kinds of *Urmusik*. From the perspective of romantic aesthetics, *Urmusik* was the one and only source to draw upon for authentic, powerful music. However, for anti-romantics, all this inarticulate moaning was regressive – 'primitive' rather than 'primal'.

As early as 1860 the music historian Ambros used the term degeneration in relation to the influence of Liszt and Wagner in the development of music, which he compared to symptoms of a sick, superannuated organism (1865, 174). Thomas Grey suggests going back even earlier, to Hanslick's 1854 description of 'pathological listening', as a precursor to theories of a degeneration of music (Grey 2002). Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (*Entartung*) from 1892 was the most popular 'biomedical' book on the downfall of art and culture at the end of the century. A Jewish medical doctor who spent the most significant part of his career as a journalist reporting to Vienna from Paris, Nordau wrote several popular books besides *Degeneration*. Nordau blamed aesthetically reprehensible art on the degeneration of society. Individuals succumbed to nervous illnesses as a consequence of the fatigue that came from the increased pace of modern life and the increasing use of narcotics to deal with it. Nordau used and expanded on Nietzsche's complaints about Wagner as increasing exhaustion, causing overexcitement and hysteria. Thomas Grey notes that Nordau's book was so popular because, 'like the related concepts of *hysteria* and *neurasthenia*, that of *degeneration* provided the satisfaction of labeling, with apparent medical-scientific precision, elusive but nonetheless very acutely felt anxieties over the modern condition' (Grey 2002, 87).

Nordau counted Nietzsche and Wagner as examples of decadent artists and thinkers, even though he drew on Nietzsche for his understanding of decadence. This was just one example of the paradox of critics of decadence being examples of decadence. As one writer recently put it, Nietzsche's critique of decadence and modernity 'rests on the unresolved and unresolvable paradox of being part of that which one condemns' (Gogröf-Voorhees 1999, 139). In *The Case of Wagner* Nietzsche acknowledged: 'I am, no less than Wagner, a child of this time; that is, a decadent' (1967, 155).

Wagner on decadence and degeneration

Wagner also deplored decadence, although one could argue that his solutions only intensified the problems. His late theoretical writings on regeneration and his last opera, *Parsifal*, represent this aesthetic and moral quicksand. Wagner's late writings appeared in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, a journal founded in 1878 for the 'friends of Wagner'. The journal's concerns went beyond the musical to advocate regeneration through a vegetarian diet to reverse the decline of nations due to the consumption of meat. Wagner's anti-Semitism was restated in biological terms, as a call to prevent Jewish assimilation that would pollute so-called 'Aryan' bloodlines. Wagner claimed that Jesus was Aryan but that the Jewish race's blood had become tainted by mixed marriages and meat. Wagner's Jesus preached asceticism (renunciation of the will). At the same time, Wagner himself continued to eat meat and apparently deny himself nothing. In general, Wagner's late works are typical of reactions to decadence; they had the effect of not correcting the problem, but rather intensifying it. It was the emphasis on health, for instance, that led to calls for racial purity and eugenics.

Wagner's understanding of the problem of degeneration explains to some extent the scenario for *Parsifal*. The 'sickness' in *Parsifal* is literal: Amfortas has a bleeding wound that won't heal and his fellow knights are dying out; their vitality is at stake. The extraordinary music written for the character of Kundry represents and includes human pre-linguistic expressive sounds, such as the scream and groan that mark her entrance in the first and third acts, respectively. Wagner seems to have intended the end of the opera to point to the way to 'redeem' degenerate society.

Nevertheless, this opera had for Nietzsche and many others all the characteristics of decadence (Dreyfus 2010). It also exhibits many traditional features of earlier romantic works. Cosima Wagner noted in her diary that Wagner believed '*Tannhäuser*, *Tristan*, and *Parsifal* belong together' (quoted in Ashman 1988, 8). The traditional romantic aspects that these three operas share include: a basis in medieval legend, supernatural elements and the stark distinction of the world of man (represented by diatonic, rhythmically regular music) versus a world of seductive, dangerous women who cause men to betray ideals of honor and duty (musically more chromatic and free-flowing). Compared to *Tannhäuser* especially, further shared themes include the use of chorales, men's chorus and marches; a connection of the world of men with organized religious communities; and a female character who serves as a composite of various qualities associated with the feminine, primal and the sensual.

In terms of plot, furthermore, the most important 'event' in the opera occurs when Parsifal is 'awakened' by Kundry's kiss. The kiss paradoxically has the effect of preventing the female's sexual seduction from being completed, and in this sense is comparable to the 'song of pious bent' that saves Florio in 'The Marble Statue' and the miraculous effect of pronouncing the names of the Virgin Mary and Elisabeth for Tannhäuser.

Late romanticism, decadence and the twentieth century

The concept of decadence helps us sort out a musicological controversy. Has nineteenth-century romanticism run its course by 1890, with the works of Mahler and Richard Strauss ushering in a new era of musical modernism? Or should the period 1890–1914 be viewed as a continuation of late nineteenth-century romanticism in music? Carl Dahlhaus, the pre-eminent musicologist in postwar Germany, vehemently defended the first position (Dahlhaus 1979b, 103–5). Speaking from the perspective of a less Germanocentric musicology, Richard Taruskin, in his *Oxford History of Western Music* (2005), has recently spoken out in favour of the second. Dahlhaus downplays the importance of decadence while Taruskin uses it in only in a limited sense; he prefers the concept 'maximalism' for music often called 'late romantic' (2005, Vol. 4, 5). Certainly, within the terrain I have mapped out above, Taruskin's representative 'maximalist' composer, Gustav Mahler, exhibits many romantic traits: a preference for romantic poets from earlier in the century and for the familiar themes of nature, religion, the power of music, love and death (Downes 2010, 194). Another romantic hallmark was Mahler's commitment to the irrational source of musical creativity, which was manifested in many statements, such as this description of composing: 'The inception and creation of a work are mystical from beginning to end; unconsciously, as if in the grip of command from outside oneself one is compelled to create something whose origin one can scarcely comprehend afterwards' (Bauer-Lechner 1980, 30).

However, we need to keep in mind that Nietzsche and Wagner also served as harbingers of modernism by laying bare the contradictions within romanticism. Although a passionate spokesman for anti-romanticism, Nietzsche confessed that he was incurably affected by the

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romantic worldview, and the same can surely be said for Wagner and Mahler. Taruskin may be hinting at these contradictions when he describes the maximalist project as an 'ultimate failure' and connects Mahler and his contemporaries to a decadent phase (2005, Vol. 4, 22). Decadence may therefore best be described as a double consciousness concerning the values and limits of romanticism.

Two world wars, two waves of anti-romanticism

Within the terminological boundaries I have sketched out, elements of romanticism persist over the entire twentieth century and into the present. On the other hand, the effect of the First World War in dramatically deflating the giant romantic bubble can hardly be underestimated. Modernism, neoclassicism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* can all be interpreted in varying degrees as reactions to a romantic ideology whose irrational mystical powers seemed to bear some responsibility for the war. Similarly, the Second World War produced an even stronger reaction against musical romanticism. Post-war serialism can be seen as an attempt to eliminate *all* perceived romantic elements of music. Anti-romanticism remained a strong force even through the Cold War. It has only been in the last twenty years that musicologists have been rewriting the history of the twentieth century and discovering a continuous tradition of romantic music that survived all of these backlashes. Romanticism, it appears, cannot be stamped out. It continues to spark debate as one of the foundational ideas in the aesthetics of music.

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