

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

Philosophy Theses

Department of Philosophy

8-10-2021

Nietzsche's Critique of "Absolute" Music

David Swigart

Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/philosophy_theses

Recommended Citation

Swigart, David, "Nietzsche's Critique of "Absolute" Music." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2021.
https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/philosophy_theses/289

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF "ABSOLUTE" MUSIC

by

DAVID SWIGART

Under the Direction of Jessica Berry, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

ABSTRACT

In *Human, All-Too-Human*, Nietzsche initiates an unexpected criticism of art, specifically a criticism of its ability to help humans justify life in a world full of suffering. Nietzsche sets his sights on absolute music, music that perpetuates religious values inherited from Christianity and renders the modern listener unable to affirm life. Drawing from various sources in nineteenth-century Germany, including his former friend Richard Wagner, Nietzsche demonstrates that rather than relying on absolute music to help us come to terms with suffering, we must abandon it in order to overcome the life-negating values it perpetuates.

INDEX WORDS: Nietzsche, Absolute Music, *Human, All-Too-Human*, Wagner, Christianity

Copyright by
David Swigart
2021

NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF "ABSOLUTE" MUSIC

by

DAVID SWIGART

Committee Chair: Jessica Berry

Committee: Gregory Moore

Andrea Scarantino

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2021

DEDICATION

To my father, whose passion for music has passed to me through blood, a passion that now inspires me to distrust its source.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
2	NIETZSCHE ON ART’S PURPOSE.....	7
3	ABSOLUTE MUSIC	8
4	APHORISM 215: NIETZSCHE’S ACCOUNT OF ABSOLUTE MUSIC	13
5	FOUR CONSEQUENCES OF NIETZSCHE’S HYPOTHESIS.....	20
6	APHORISM 217: THE INTELLECT AND THE SENSES	24
7	APHORISM 217: NIETZSCHE’S EVALUATION OF ABSOLUTE MUSIC.....	26
7.1	The Enormous Majority	27
7.2	The “Ten Thousand”	28
8	CONCLUSION	30
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	34

1 INTRODUCTION

Music seems to have a unique power over us. It can deeply influence how we feel, “speak” to us in an intimate way, even bewitch us. Music’s ability to inspire us has long been greeted, by musician and listener alike, with celebration and wonder. Even skeptics, who believe music’s power over us is not *as* wonderful or *as* universal as others believe, continue to listen to music with joy. But should music’s influence on us be cause for concern? Should we not also wonder how music’s spellbinding powers may be influencing our deepest values, how music may in fact be causing us to devalue or forget things that are important to us? Music may seem so wonderful that we listen to it in order to escape our imperfect lives, to feel a part of some transcendent realm that is free from the ugliness of our present condition. Rather than value anything in day-to-day existence, we throw it all aside in favor of some unparalleled beauty that music seems to express.

Once an unabashed celebrator of music’s unique powers, Nietzsche began to take these concerns seriously. Listening to the music of his own time, from the grand symphonies of Beethoven to the dramas of his soon-to-be enemy, Richard Wagner, Nietzsche found cause for concern. He was troubled both by the state of modern music and by the direction that it was taking. In 1878 Nietzsche sounded the alarm. No longer celebrating the wonders of modern music, he insisted that such music is symptomatic of our turning away from life, of devaluing our own sensible existence.

Nietzsche’s 1878 *Human, All-Too-Human* (*HH*) offers a sobering reexamination of the art he had championed only a short time earlier, notably in *The Birth of Tragedy* (*BT*). In *HH* Nietzsche explores the nature and influence of absolute music in aphorisms 215–217. Whereas in other parts of *HH* Nietzsche focuses on the artist and composer, in these aphorisms Nietzsche closely examines the *listener*, specifically the roles of the listener’s intellect and senses. Nietzsche

claims that listeners in the nineteenth century, compared to listeners in antiquity, have a radically different way of hearing sounds. In antiquity, listeners' reactions to sounds depended primarily on how these sounds impacted the senses, and the intellect played little to no role. Over thousands of years the intellect's role increased. As a result of this development, listeners' reactions to music now depend primarily on the intellect, and these listeners are increasingly unable to appreciate music based on how it impacts their senses.

For Nietzsche, the changing roles of the intellect and the senses are far from inconsequential; those changes have tracked a significant shift in how listeners value life itself. Nietzsche claims that absolute music encourages listeners to value a reality beyond the sensible world. "Absolute music" generally refers to music that expresses meaning independent of extra-musical elements, such as words, scenery, or a story. Importantly for Nietzsche, in the nineteenth-century absolute music was also closely associated with transcendence; absolute music expressed a divine "absolute" that transcended man-made ideas. The importance of absolute music for Nietzsche, and his reason for criticizing it, is better understood through Nietzsche's more well-known assault on morality and its Christian foundations. We should keep in mind that Nietzsche's criticism of Christian values was not unconditional but was motivated by his concern for their psychological influence in modern society. Whereas in earlier stages of Christianity, Christian values were bearable because of the widespread and genuine belief in the Christian doctrine, such as a benevolent god and the promise of salvation, most people in modern European society, according to Nietzsche, no longer maintained a belief in such doctrines. Modern people inherited the Christian values without a set of beliefs to make such values bearable. The now negative psychological influence of Christian values led Nietzsche to seek new values that could help people once again affirm life.

Even in *HH*, Nietzsche is concerned with the harm that morality, rooted in Christianity, has on psychological health. A chief value of Christianity, the rejection of nature, including our own natural desires, in favor of a transcendent and perfect god beyond this world, came to define the values of morality as well. These moral values promote what Christian values had promoted: self-condemnation, a sense of worthlessness, and a rejection of the natural world in favor of a transcendent one. Morality then was riddled with values that caused people to reject life, to see themselves as worthless. However, morality is not the only thing to have its root in Christian values; these same values came to animate art as well. Far from a coincidence, European art had developed within Christian society for more than a millennium, becoming inseparable from the beliefs and values this religion espoused. Even if such Christian values are not explicit in art, as they often failed to be in morality, these hidden values, what Nietzsche would later refer to as “ascetic ideals,” remain at work in art, including the sounds of modern music. These values that encourage the rejection of the sensible world, along with an overactive intellect and weakened senses, render listeners of absolute music in the nineteenth century unable to connect positively to the world in such a way that life appears worth living; absolute music threatens the listener’s ability to affirm life.

Many scholars who have written about Nietzsche’s view of aesthetic value and experience have noted and attempted to explain his new and critical view of music and art generally in *HH*, something Nietzsche himself did in his 1886 preface to this work. Many scholars have even pointed out Nietzsche’s rising doubts about art’s ability to help humans affirm life, as well as his criticism of art because of its inheritance and perpetuation of Christian values.¹ Almost all of these

¹ For a discussion of Nietzsche’s criticism of art’s ability to help humans affirm life in *HH*, see especially Young (1992) and Pothen (2002). For a discussion of Nietzsche’s criticism of art’s

discussions also emphasize how *HH* constitutes Nietzsche's break with the views of Richard Wagner. An influential German composer, dramatist, and theorist of art in nineteenth-century Europe, Wagner was a close and influential friend of Nietzsche's prior to the publication of *HH*. Wagner strongly believed that a new form of art, specifically his musical dramas based upon the Attic tragedy, could transform the values of European society to more positive, life-affirming ones. Even though Nietzsche had strongly endorsed Wagner's views about art in previous works, such as *BT* and *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth (RB)*, many scholars emphasize that Nietzsche rejects Wagner's views about art (even Wagner's own art) in *HH*. Rather than supporting Wagner's attempt to bring about life-affirming values through art, in *HH* Nietzsche rejects the claim that art could accomplish such a feat.

Within these well-known discussions, fewer scholars have considered Nietzsche's analysis of the audience of art, such as the listener, and those who do consider these topics seldom note the roles of the audience's intellect and senses.² While the audience's intellect and senses are not the most prominent topics of discussion in Nietzsche's criticism of art in *HH*, I argue that focusing on how their roles change in the listener and relate to the listener's ability to affirm life can help shed light on Nietzsche's break with Wagner's views about art and the extent to which Nietzsche rejects the notion that art is a means by which humans affirm life.

My examination of the changing roles of the intellect and the senses will help illuminate the extent to which Nietzsche's ideas in *HH* are *indebted* to Wagner's own views. Although it is often accepted that *HH* represents Nietzsche's break with Wagner's views on art, I claim that

Christian inheritance and perpetuation of Christian values see especially Ridley (2007) and Franco (2011).

² One scholar who does note the role of the intellect in an analysis of *HH* is Matthew Meyer, who mentions it in passing when discussing aphorism 215 (Meyer 2019: 107-108).

Nietzsche maintains some key Wagnerian views in aphorisms 215 and 217, such as Wagner's account of art's *historical* development, views that Nietzsche uses to argue against other views that Wagner holds. I further claim that the views Nietzsche inherits from Wagner are not mere tools of polemics, views that Nietzsche employs to counter Wagner and then discards after use, but instead constitute an important part of Nietzsche's view of art in *HH*. Therefore, even though *HH* is Nietzsche's "break-away" work from Wagner, it is also significantly continuous with Wagner's views.³

Furthermore, an examination of the changing roles of the listener's intellect and senses helps to demonstrate the strength of Nietzsche's belief that modern music is not life-affirming. Many scholars claim that even in *HH*, Nietzsche still believes that art has the ability to help humans affirm life.⁴ Many scholars hold this view because Nietzsche has positive views of art in the works both preceding and following *HH*. The abundance of positive views about art in other works leads many scholars to interpret Nietzsche's criticisms of art in *HH* not as serious attacks on art as a whole, but as criticisms of certain kinds of art and artists. Furthermore, they claim that in *HH* Nietzsche maintains the view that art helps humans affirm life. This view allows scholars to claim

³ Carl Dahlhaus (1974) recognized that Nietzsche used Wagner's ideas against other views that Wagner held as early as 1871 in "On Music and Words". Dahlhaus argues that Nietzsche's adherence to Wagner's views is not a polemical tactic, but rather demonstrates Nietzsche's agreement with part of Wagner's account that Nietzsche believed was incompatible with other views that Wagner held. However, what Nietzsche is arguing against in 1871 is entirely different than his target in *HH*. In "On Music and Words" Nietzsche is defending the claim that music has metaphysical significance, very similar to his claims in *BT*. He accuses Wagner of attributing too much importance to poetry. However, in *HH* Nietzsche's claims are reversed; he not only rejects the metaphysical significance of music, but argues that people, including Wagner, have attributed too much importance to music, the meaning of which ultimately depends on poetry.

⁴ Ridley (2007) offers the strongest position about Nietzsche's continuing faith in art's ability to help humans affirm life in *HH*. Weaker forms of this view can be found in Meyer (2019) and Young (1992).

that Nietzsche maintained the view that art helps humans affirm life throughout his career, resolving inconsistencies that seem to exist between Nietzsche's works.

I argue to the contrary that Nietzsche's account of the listener's intellect and senses shows that modern music is simply unable to help humans affirm life. While I specifically discuss modern music, I believe that my account will implicate other modern types of art as well, thereby challenging scholars who claim that Nietzsche maintains a positive view of art in *HH* for its ability to help humans affirm life. Rather than using other works of Nietzsche to justify this claim, I will be focusing specifically on *HH* to show that its views cannot be harmonized with the views he espouses in earlier and later works.

Both of these points contribute to a larger debate about the continuity (or lack thereof) of *HH* with Nietzsche's earlier works, especially *BT*, and the works that follow *HH*. Nietzsche's persistent adherence to key Wagnerian views in *HH* can help demonstrate the ways in which *HH* is continuous in important ways with *BT*. Nevertheless, Nietzsche's thorough and far-reaching criticisms of art in *HH* create a significant tension with Nietzsche's views of art in later works. In the works following *HH* Nietzsche claims that art *is* able to help humans affirm life. Scholars who defend the continuity in Nietzsche's views between *HH* and later works, whether about art (Pothen 2002) or in general (Meyer 2019), are challenged by my account.

2 NIETZSCHE ON ART'S PURPOSE

Nietzsche's concern with the influence of absolute music in *HH* indicates an important shift from his view of art in *BT*. In this earlier work, Nietzsche claims that art makes life bearable in spite of the fact that life is filled with suffering.⁵ Nietzsche did not mean by this that art is a pleasant distraction from suffering, allowing us to forget life's miseries from time to time. Rather, art could help humans embrace life, to think it worth living. Therefore, Nietzsche held that art had the ability to change pessimistic views about life, namely the view that life is not worth living because of the suffering within it. This is a view Nietzsche attributes to contemporary European society and which he seeks to address. *BT* is an attempt to show how art could help modern European society overcome this pessimism. Citing the Greeks as an example of a culture that employed art successfully in this way, *BT* focuses on how following the Greek's use of art could once again help the modern man affirm life.

In *HH* Nietzsche's once-powerful enthusiasm for art's ability to help humans affirm life is replaced by a deep skepticism toward anything that claims such an ability, art included. Even in *BT*, art was supposed to help the modern human overcome the values of Christianity by creating new values that would promote the affirmation of life, values that could replace the older Christian values that now hinder one's ability to find life bearable. However, in *HH* Nietzsche realizes that modern art does no such thing. Rather, modern art only perpetuates these values, *preventing* humans from finding a new and effective way to affirm life. Taking a naturalist approach in *HH*, Nietzsche examines the psychological underpinnings of aesthetic experience. Tracking the close relationship between art and Christianity in the past, Nietzsche demonstrates that art encourages

⁵ Nietzsche brings up this view of art from the very beginning of *BT*, in the "Foreword to Richard Wagner".

the same values that Christianity does. The realization that art encourages the very values that it was supposed to overcome led Nietzsche to break with Wagner and to challenge his previous belief that art is able to help humans affirm life.

It is important to note that in *HH* Nietzsche continues to hold that the purpose of art *is* to help humans affirm life, even though he has become skeptical of its capacity to do so. However, Nietzsche's main aim through much of *HH* is not to state what art's purpose is, nor to endorse the use of art for dealing with life. Instead, Nietzsche evaluates whether various forms of art actually succeed in fulfilling this purpose.⁶ Nietzsche's evaluation of absolute music is based on his skepticism about its ability to fulfill its purpose of helping listeners affirm life.

3 ABSOLUTE MUSIC

Even though Richard Wagner coined the term "absolute music" in 1846, the concept of absolute music can be traced back to the works of Schelling, Wackenroder, and Tieck in the late eighteenth century.⁷ The general definition of absolute music I offered earlier can be attributed to Romantic theorists who also preceded Wagner, such as E.T.A. Hoffman. This general definition stated that absolute music was able to express meaning independent of extra-musical elements, and in the nineteenth century was believed to express the "absolute." This definition includes two aspects that are important for understanding absolute music. The first aspect is absolute music's *autonomy*; its ability expresses meaning independent of extra-musical elements (such as words). The second aspect is absolute music's ability to express the *absolute*. In order to understand

⁶ Nietzsche comes close to describing art's purpose in aphorism 154 where he once again considers the Greeks, stating that they "knew that even misery could become enjoyment [*Genüsse*] solely through art".

⁷ Bonds (2014, pp. 132-134).

Wagner's later use of the term, his views of absolute music, and how Nietzsche reacted to Wagner's views, we must first examine these two aspects.

A musical work is autonomous if its effect and significance do not include or depend on extra-musical elements, such as words, images, or gestures. Autonomy implies that music's effect and significance depend solely on musical elements, which include chords, rhythms, cadences, and so forth. Absolute music is autonomous because it neither refers to nor draws from anything outside of music, such as a theme, a story, or a scene. Music that is "about" something outside of itself fails to be autonomous and would therefore fail to be absolute. Instrumental music that lacks a title, program, and any other extra-musical element is often cited as a form of absolute music, a famous example of which is Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

The distinction between absolute music and program music is often cited to demonstrate this point. Originally the term "program music" referred to music for which an explanatory program was written, something the audience would read prior to a performance. This program would explain what the music was about, providing a literary or explanatory background that would connect the music to a certain story or theme. An example of this would be Liszt's symphonic poem *Orpheus*, which was first performed in 1854. Liszt wrote a program for this work describing the key themes from the tale of Orpheus that motivated his work. The intent was that the audience would read this program and interpret the music through these stated themes (Glass 2020). Because Liszt's musical work relied on an extra-musical element, a descriptive program, in order to have a certain significance to the audience, this work is not autonomous. Therefore, it is not absolute music. It is important to note that instrumental music does not automatically qualify as absolute music. Liszt's *Orpheus* was performed solely by instruments, lacking words or scenery during the performance. What made it "program music" was the additional program connecting it

to the tale of Orpheus. Therefore, music that is instrumental could still fail to be absolute if there are any extra-musical elements added to aid in its effect or significance.

Views about absolute music in nineteenth-century Germany included this notion of autonomy, but the term “absolute” had much stronger connotations.⁸ Strongly influenced by Romanticism, absolute music draws its meaning from notions of the “absolute.” The “absolute” refers to something ultimate and supersensible. It does not depend on anything else, but rather is the basis upon which everything else depends. It cannot be grasped by thought or language, though it has some transcendent meaning, often likened to a divine truth, and was often taken to be an expression of some ultimate or higher metaphysical reality. For many in nineteenth-century Germany, absolute music was “absolute” not merely because it was autonomous, but because it revealed the absolute to listeners. Many writers, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, believed that absolute music had a unique connection to the absolute. Only absolute music could express the absolute, which was believed to be ungraspable by thought and language.⁹ Therefore, absolute music was not merely autonomous; it expressed the absolute, the ultimate and ungraspable, which nothing outside of absolute music could achieve.

Entering the German musical scene after Romantic views such as Hoffmann’s had become popular, Wagner quickly challenged the value of absolute music. In his 1846 program to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the piece in which Wagner coins the term “absolute music,” Wagner claims that Beethoven’s final symphony has overcome absolute music, representing a

⁸ The following is taken from Fürbeth and Sorgner (2010, pp. 12-14).

⁹ Thinkers disputed the means by which the absolute was expressed. Some emphasized that the absolute was expressed via untranslatable emotions conjured up in the listeners. Other views emphasized the fact that the formal qualities of music, which could not be translated into language, were able to express the absolute. For a further discussion of the various means by which the absolute was expressed, see section three below.

transition from absolute music to a music of the future. For Wagner, absolute music is not something to be pursued but left behind as a relic of the past.¹⁰

Wagner's dismissal of absolute music as something to be overcome was supported by his belief that autonomous music was deficient in what it could express. Wagner made these views explicit in two of his most famous writings on aesthetics: *Artwork of the Future* (1850) and *Opera and Drama* (1852). For Wagner, autonomous music could at best evoke vague and general emotions in the listener, but it was unable to communicate something that the listener could *understand*. Rather, autonomous music should be unified with other kinds of art, such as the art of dance and the art of prose, in order to communicate meaning effectively. This unification is exactly what Wagner planned to achieve in his own "artwork of the future," variously referred to as a total work of art [*Gesamtkunstwerk*], as a drama, and by later writers as a musical drama [*Musikdrama*].¹¹ Only when all the various forms of art are integrated with one another could music effectively express meaning that the audience could understand. Consequently, Wagner firmly rejected the belief that autonomous music had a higher value than music combined with other forms of art, and he was highly critical of the claim that absolute music could somehow express something ungraspable by language.

Wagner's rejection of absolute music seems to be behind Nietzsche's own concise definition of absolute music at the end of aphorism 216: "music in which everything is at once understood symbolically without further assistance" (*HH* 216). Nietzsche's definition is neither a

¹⁰ "Bericht über die Aufführung der Neunten Symphonie von Beethoven im Jahre 1846 in Dresden nebst Programm dazu" in Wagner, Richard (1983) *Dichtungen und Schriften*, Vol. 9, pp. 12-28.

¹¹ Wagner was critical of this last term. For more information see Wagner's "Über die Benennung 'Musikdrama'" in Wagner, Richard (1983) *Dichtungen und Schriften*, Vol. 9, pp. 271-277. Examples of such "artworks of the future" include Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, *der Ring der Nibelungen*, and *Parsifal*.

wholesale rejection nor acceptance of Wagner's position. Nietzsche's definition agrees with Wagner's view insofar as it states that in absolute music, everything is understood symbolically [*symbolisch verstanden*]. For Nietzsche, the claim that absolute music is understood *symbolically* means that it is understood linguistically; the meaning of absolute music is derived from language. What absolute music expresses is not something ineffable and ungraspable, but something that originates in thought and language. The definition Nietzsche offers seems indebted to Wagner's own views, namely that language has to play some sort of role if music is to express meaning.

However, in the very same sentence in which Nietzsche seems to agree with Wagner, Nietzsche challenges Wagner as well—Nietzsche claims that music can express some form of meaning that the listener understands without further assistance [*weitere Beihilfe*], by which is meant extra-musical elements such as words. Nietzsche, therefore, is claiming that music is able to take on the function of language and express meaning even if it is not accompanied by language. This is a direct counter to Wagner's claim that language and dance must accompany music if music is to express meaning.¹²

We can now see that Nietzsche takes on one of Wagner's views about absolute music, but nevertheless rejects another. Nietzsche agrees with Wagner that autonomous music is unable to express the absolute, something which transcends language, distancing himself from Romantic views of absolute music. Nevertheless, Nietzsche calls into question Wagner's claim that a

¹² Dahlhaus (1974) notes that at times Wagner seems to admit that instrumental music can express what dance and words express without being accompanied by either. However, Dahlhaus argues that this is because Wagner is trying to reconcile his own views about the *Musikdrama* with the views of Arthur Schopenhauer, a philosopher who defends instrumental music's unique ability to express the absolute, or, specifically in Schopenhauer's case, the "will." However, even with these attempts at reconciliation, Wagner never clearly admits that instrumental music can independently express what dance and words express, and he never gives up his views about the *Musikdrama* and its superiority over instrumental music.

Musikdrama, a unity of music with language and other art forms, is necessary for music to express meaning. Rather, Nietzsche believed that music can express linguistic meaning without being accompanied by language. In order to understand how this could be possible, we must turn to the preceding aphorism.

4 APHORISM 215: NIETZSCHE'S ACCOUNT OF ABSOLUTE MUSIC

In aphorism 215, Nietzsche provides a hypothesis about the origins of absolute music. Put simply, his hypothesis states that music is able to express linguistic meaning without language because music had been accompanied by poetry for millennia. As a result, the linguistic meaning of poetry became associated with various musical sounds and elements. Eventually, listeners would think of the linguistic meanings that had long been associated with certain musical sounds and elements, even if they were no longer accompanied by poetry.

Nietzsche's hypothesis draws on two prominent views about absolute music in nineteenth-century Germany and from Wagner's own account of how humans' reactions to sound [*Ton*] developed historically. The first view emphasized that music is a "language of emotion" [*Sprache des Gefühls*], a phrase employed by Friedrich Schlegel. This language "operates on principles beyond words, reasons, and concepts" (Bonds 2014: 114). This view focused on the meaning of the emotions evoked by music, and how these emotions revealed the nature of the absolute.¹³

The second view, which is likely drawn from Eduard Hanslick's *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854), focused on the way in which absolute music's *formal* qualities, such as harmony and tempo, allowed music to express the absolute. Whereas the first view focused on the emotions

¹³ For an expression of this view, see Hoffmann's review of Beethoven's fifth Symphony (Hoffmann 1977).

evoked in the listener, this second view focused on the formal principles of music and the way in which various sounds produced pleasure and displeasure in the listener.¹⁴

The third view that is influential in Nietzsche's hypothesis comes from Wagner.¹⁵ Influenced by Hegel, who had provided a historical account for the development of art, Wagner provides an account of how humans' reactions to sound changes throughout history. Wagner further claims that at the final stage of this development, humans are able to integrate all the ways in which previous humans reacted to music, which correlates with the unification of all the arts in the *Musikdrama*, a Wagnerian form of drama that would unify music, poetry, and dance.

Wagner claims that there are four key stages in the development of humans' reaction to sound. In the first stage, humans react to sound based on the bodily sensations such sounds produce in the listener, namely pleasure and displeasure. Wagner names humans who relate to sound in this way "bodily people" [*Leibesmenschen*], emphasizing the visceral nature of this reaction. In the second stage, humans react to sound based on the general emotions [*allgemeine Gefühle*] various sounds evoke in the listener.¹⁶ Such humans are referred to as "people of emotion"

¹⁴ Whether Hanslick's view actually implies that absolute music, formally understood, expresses the absolute is debated to this day. Dahlhaus maintained that it does, but others, such as Bonds (2014) and Landerer and Rotharb (2018) have noted the changes Hanslick made in new editions to call attention away from music's relationship to the absolute and his infrequent use of the term "absolute" in his work, both of which seem to downplay his belief in music's relationship to the absolute. Nevertheless, Bonds notes that Hanslick was unable to fully avoid admitting that music bears some relationship to the absolute.

¹⁵ The following is drawn from pp. 32-35 in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* in Wagner, Richard (1983) *Dichtungen und Schriften*, Vol. 11, pp. 9-157.

¹⁶ Wagner claims that at this stage only general emotions, emotions that are vague and are not made precise by concepts, are experienced by the listener. Only when language accompanies sound can sound evoke particular emotions [*besondere Gefühle*]. The distinction between general and particular emotions in Wagner's account not only offers a more precise account of emotions evoked by music in comparison to earlier thinkers such as Hoffmann, but also shows how even if music can evoke general emotions without language, language is still required for music to communicate concepts.

[*Gefühlsmenschen*]. Once language is combined with sound, humans enter into a new stage, in which they react to sound (combined with language) based on what is signified, that is, based on what they understand [*verstehen*]. Wagner calls such humans “people of understanding” [*Verstandesmenschen*]. Most important is the final stage, in which humans of all preceding stages of history (*Leibesmench*, *Gefühlsmensch*, and *Verstandesmensch*), each with a distinct way of reacting to sound, are unified in a new stage of humans that react to sound such that all previously described ways are integrated with one another. This final stage of humans correlates with the development of the *Musikdrama*, an artwork that provides all relevant artistic aspects (including sound and language) such that the listener can simultaneously react to sound in all three ways: by sensation, emotion, and understanding.

As the reader may have noted, the first and second stages of Wagner’s account share similarities with the formal view and the view that music is a language of emotion described at the beginning of this section. The key difference between Wagner’s account and these other views from thinkers such as Hanslick and Hoffmann is that for Wagner the formal view and the “emotion-centered” view are individually deficient; they do not encompass all the ways in which humans react to sound. Only when sensation, emotion, and understanding are integrated does sound, as a component of the *Musikdrama*, fulfill its expressive potential. A consequence of this view is that the expressive capacity of “absolute music,” insofar as it is not accompanied by language, is itself deficient; independent of language sound does not signify anything, but only evokes sensations and general emotions. Even more important, the formal view and emotion-centered view only refer to ways of reacting to sound that are *precursors* to the final stage in which the listener reacts more holistically to the *Musikdrama*.

Nietzsche's own, deceptively short, hypothesis about the origins of absolute music draws from all three views. Taking up Wagner's historical framework, Nietzsche places both the formal view and the emotion-centered view at different points in the development of music and reinterprets them through this placement. Where Nietzsche locates each view in the development of music is critical for understanding his hypothesis:

'Absolute music' is either form in itself, at a primitive stage [*im rohen Zustand*] of music in which sounds made in tempo and at varying volume gave [*macht*] pleasure as such, or symbolism of form speaking to the understanding without poetry [*die schon zum Verständnis redende Symbolik der Formen*] after both arts had been united over a long course of evolution [*in langer Entwicklung*] and the musical form had finally become enmeshed in threads of feeling and concepts. (HH 215)

Similar to Hanslick's view, which claims that the absolute is expressed through music's formal qualities, in the first disjunct Nietzsche refers to music that is enjoyed solely for its formal elements, such as tempo and volume. Nietzsche locates music of this kind at an earlier stage in musical evolution.¹⁷ This type of music does not evoke emotions or concepts, but simply evokes pleasure or displeasure in the listener. The second disjunct refers to music in which formal elements have become combined with emotions [*Gefühle*] and concepts [*Begriffe*]. Nietzsche refers to these concepts and emotions as symbolic content [*Symbolik*].¹⁸

Symbolic content in music refers to concepts that are evoked by various musical elements. When we listen to music with symbolic content, this music arouses certain sensations that in turn

¹⁷ The reader should note that both "evolution" and "development" are translations of the same term, *Entwicklung*, in the German text of Wagner and Nietzsche. I will try to keep this as consistent as possible, but I will draw the English term from the English translations of Wagner and Nietzsche.

¹⁸ It is interesting that Nietzsche collapses stages two and three in Wagner's account, the division between the *Gefühlsmensch* and the *Verstandesmensch*. This could be an intentional move, by means of which Nietzsche may be challenging Wagner's distinction of emotions and concepts, both in terms of their respective position in historical development of how humans react to sound and in terms of the relationship emotions have to understanding, or for Nietzsche, the intellect. I leave this consideration open for now, in the hope that it may prove fruitful in future research.

conjure up concepts in us. The symbolic content, and the sensations to which they are indexed, are brought about by various formal elements of music; different formal structures (such as a specific sequence of chords) are associated with different symbolic content. For example, I may listen to an instrumental version of the melody from “Dies Irae.”¹⁹ This specific melody conjures up the concepts of “death” and “damnation”; “death” and “damnation” are indexed to this melody. The emotions that this melody evokes in the listener, such as fear, are a response to the concepts associated with this melody. The musical sounds themselves do not cause the emotion of fear, but the symbolic content that is indexed to these musical sounds causes it.

Nietzsche locates this second kind of music, in which symbolic content is indexed to sounds (*symbolic absolute music*), at a later stage in the evolution of music, specifically in the modern age, including the nineteenth century. At this point in time, Nietzsche claims, listeners are not responding to the formal aspects of music in themselves, but are instead reacting to the concepts that are evoked by various musical sounds. Nietzsche therefore seems to reject the idea that listeners in his era can respond solely to music’s formal qualities, since by this time concepts and emotions have been mixed into the sounds themselves. Nietzsche then focuses his attention on symbolic absolute music. *HH* offers a hypothetical etiology in order to explain how concepts became indexed to formal elements of music.

Nietzsche begins by pointing out that music used to be accompanied by poetry. The sounds of music were perceived simultaneously with poetry, and therefore such sounds were perceived along with the symbolic content of poetry. The simultaneous perception of poetry and music led listeners to associate the symbolic content of poetry not just with the words, but with the musical

¹⁹ Let us assume for the sake of example, that I do not know or understand the title associated with this melody but am only aware of the sounds present in the melody.

sounds that accompanied the words. Eventually, listeners were able to make the associations even without the words. If music had not been accompanied by poetry for such a long time, then the symbolic content would never have been associated with, and finally attributed to, the sounds themselves. Following this hypothesis, Nietzsche's claim that absolute music is "understood symbolically" does not mean that absolute music has symbolic content inherently. This phrase simply but sharply conveys that this symbolic content was a historical import from poetry, from an extra-musical source.

The parallels between Nietzsche's historical hypothesis and Wagner's own historical account are hard to ignore. Both claim that humans first reacted to sound based on the sensations it produced in the listener, and later in history humans reacted to sound based on the emotions it produced in the listener. Both also discuss how the combination of language with sound brought about a new stage in the way humans reacted to sound.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche's hypothesis differs from Wagner's view on two key points. First, as briefly noted in the previous section, Nietzsche claims that over time various sounds eventually come to have symbolic content without being accompanied by language. Therefore, humans are able to understand the symbolic content in music even when no language is present. This is not possible in Wagner's account because humans are able to understand music only when language is present. For Nietzsche symbolic absolute music is actually preceded and enabled by artistic works that combine sound and language, including songs and opera. Nietzsche is likely implicating Wagner's own special dramas when he refers to dramatic works. With this in mind, it seems as though Nietzsche is implicitly challenging Wagner's view that the *Musikdrama* is the artwork of the future, an artwork that will supplant "absolute music." Instead, "absolute music," at the very least symbolic absolute music, is that which occurs after works that combine sound and language.

The second key point on which Nietzsche's hypothesis differs from Wagner's is that Nietzsche does not commit himself to a "final stage" during which the various ways in which humans react to music are integrated with one another. Not only does Nietzsche's hypothesis distinctly lack any mention of such a stage, parts of his hypothesis imply that this final stage would not be possible. Nietzsche notes how humans at different stages of development would each hear the same piece of music in different ways (one formally, feeling pleasure and displeasure, the other reacting to the emotions and concepts such a piece evokes). Based on how each human animal is constituted at its particular stage of development, Nietzsche seems to imply that a human at one stage of development would be unable to react to sound the way someone at another stage of development would. The specific reasons why Nietzsche does not commit himself to a final stage in his historical hypothesis and rejects the possibility of integrating the various ways in which humans react to sound will become clear after examining aphorism 217. In light of its importance both for Wagner's account and for the role it plays in relation to Wagner's *Musikdramen*, it is important to note how Nietzsche is already implicitly calling such an integration into question.

Furthermore, the strong division between humans who have different ways of reacting to sounds in Nietzsche's hypothesis demonstrates the influence of the formal and emotion-centered views. Both the formal view and emotion-centered view of absolute music reject the claim that humans are able to simultaneously react to sound in different ways, such as a simultaneous reaction to sound based on the sensations and the emotions it produces in the listener. Nietzsche's account similarly rejects the claim that humans can simultaneously react to sounds based on the sensations and the emotions they produce in the listener.²⁰ However, Wagner's account attempts to show how

²⁰ Hanslick (1986) demonstrates this powerfully in his work *On the Musically Beautiful*, in which the first chapter title, "The Aesthetics of Feeling", which portrays the emotion-centered view, is

the claim that both views are incommensurable is misguided. Rather than accepting that music is either simply a matter of emotion or of formal properties, Wagner claims that reactions to sound based on emotions and formal properties are merely parts of the holistic way in which humans listen to music. Therefore, Wagner does not reject the emotion-centered view in favor of a formal view, or *vice versa*. Wagner rejects the basis of the debate. In 215 Nietzsche reintroduces the debate that Wagner rejected; the emotion-centered view and the formal view of music are incommensurable. Using Wagner's own views against him, Nietzsche combines the incommensurability of these views with Wagner's historical interpretation. Both views are incommensurable because they both are related to different historical stages of human development, calling into question Wagner's attempt to integrate reactions to music based on sensation and emotion.²¹

There are four further consequences of this hypothesis that will impact Nietzsche's investigation and evaluation of absolute music in *HH* 217.

5 FOUR CONSEQUENCES OF NIETZSCHE'S HYPOTHESIS

The first consequence of Nietzsche's hypothesis is that absolute music is not autonomous after all; it has content, but it does not have its content inherently. Absolute music would have symbolic content inherently if the concepts and emotions that were brought about by listening to music were *necessarily* evoked in the listener by various musical elements. This is because the symbolic content of music would be part of the music, not a projection of the listener onto the

bluntly followed by a chapter titled, "The 'Representation of Feelings' is Not the Content of Music".

²¹ The influence of the emotion-centered view and the formal view is further supported by the fact that Nietzsche refers to both the historical stage when humans reacted to sound formally and the historical stage when humans reacted to sound based on emotion as one possible meaning of "absolute music," a phrase that Wagner does not ascribe to any stage of his historical account, but this term was prominent in the formal and emotion-centered views.

music. Whenever one listened to music, one would perceive the symbolic content that the music contained. One would also be unable to listen to music without perceiving its symbolic content. Furthermore, everyone would perceive the same symbolic content from the same piece of music. Returning to the example above, if “death” and “damnation,” were necessarily indexed to the melody of “Dies Irae,” then whenever one listened to this melody, one would think of “death” and “damnation.” One would be unable to listen to this melody without perceiving *this* symbolic content. However, because the symbolic content of absolute music is the result of music’s ancient association with poetry, the specific symbolic content of a specific combination of musical elements (such as a chord progression) is the result of the symbolic content of poetry with which this combination was associated. As a result, the connection of specific symbolic content to specific musical sounds is not necessary, but contingent, dependent on the various ways sounds were paired with the symbolic content of poetry. Therefore, the symbolic content one perceives when one listens to music is not indexed necessarily to the sounds of the music. This first consequence already demonstrates that “absolute music” is, for Nietzsche, not in fact absolute. Music could qualify as absolute only if it were autonomous, but the “absolute” music his contemporaries have in mind in fact depends on an extra-musical element, poetry.

The second consequence of Nietzsche’s hypothesis is that it challenges the possibility that someone can passively listen to music. Listening to music would be passive if the listener simply perceived without distortion, alteration, or addition the symbolic content that was already contained in the music. If this were the case, then when one listened to music, one would be unable to affect the symbolic content that the music contained; such symbolic content would be the result of the musical elements themselves, not of the listener’s associations. The first consequence shows that the symbolic content of music does not originally arise from music’s formal elements but is

actually drawn from poetry. But Nietzsche goes further and claims that the symbolic content of music depends on the intellect [*Intellekt*] of the listener: “It was the intellect itself which first introduced [*hineingelegt*] this significance into sounds” (HH 215). While the symbolic content of music is drawn from poetry, it is the listener who associates the symbolic content of poetry with the music and eventually attributes such symbolic content to the music independent of poetry. The symbolic content that the listener associates with the sound is not at the whim of the listener, but derived from the historical association over centuries, if not millennia. The listener’s intellect plays a necessary role in the formation of such an association. Without the intellect playing an active role, no association would occur, and the purely formal structures of music would cease having connections to symbolic content.

The third consequence of Nietzsche’s hypothesis is that the intellect’s role when listening to music *changes* dramatically over the course of human history. In aphorism 215 Nietzsche describes two kinds of humans, those who have remained behind [*zurückgeblieben sind*] in the development of music, and those who are advanced [*die Fortgeschrittenen*]. Both would react to the same piece of music in different ways. The former humans would understand [*empfinden*] the piece of music in a purely formalistic way. At an earlier stage in musical evolution, humans perceived sound in a purely formalistic way, that is, without any symbolic content. At this stage, no symbolic content was attributed to sounds. Therefore, there was nothing for the intellect of such listeners to understand when perceiving sounds by themselves; the intellect played no evident role when listening to sounds by themselves. Instead, listeners would simply sense symbolically empty sounds and react to the pleasurable or displeasurable sensations that the sounds produced.

When sounds were presented side by side with poetry, the intellect, already playing a role in understanding the symbolic content of the words, began to play a role when listening to sounds.

Once listeners began to attribute the symbolic content of poetry to the sounds themselves, the intellect began to play a role in the perception of sounds by themselves; listeners could then understand sounds. Listening to the same piece of music as those atavistic types who relate to music merely formally, these advanced humans would react to it based on the emotions and concepts it evoked. Whereas the former group only senses [*empfinden*] sounds and as a result experiences some kind of pleasure or pain, those who are advanced understand [*verstehen*] sounds.²² Therefore, the intellect's role in listening to sounds by themselves changed.

The final consequence of Nietzsche's hypothesis mirrors Wagner's reaction to absolute music, in its rejection of absolute music's ability to reveal the absolute. Because Nietzsche attributes the significance of absolute music to symbolic content that is established by a longtime association with poetry, what "absolute music" signifies is not immediate and necessary but is instead dependent on language. Though listeners themselves are unaware of the origin of the symbolic content of absolute music, so that they may think of it as autonomous, such music still fails to be autonomous because it draws its symbolic content from an extra-musical source. Furthermore, because the significance of absolute music is the result of accompanying language, such as poetry, absolute music's significance is derived from language.²³ Therefore, the significance of absolute music is confined to the significance of language. Because the significance of absolute content is derived from and limited to the significance of language, the "absolute" that

²² R. J. Hollingdale (1996) translates both "empfinden" and "verstehen" as "to understand," but it is crucial to separate these two terms in order to appreciate fully the different ways in which listeners can listen to sounds. "Empfinden" should be translated as "to sense." Nietzsche often uses it in order to designate the involvement of the senses. "Verstehen" refers to thought and should be translated as "to understand." This distinction will become key in aphorism 217.

²³ Music did not simply take on the meanings of Greek language and preserve them for thousands of years. Other language sources, such as medieval chants, accompanied and changed the symbolic content of music. The impact of Christianity on the symbolic content of music will be directly addressed in the last section.

absolute music supposedly reveals does not transcend language; it does not refer to some ineffable and ultimate reality.

6 APHORISM 217: THE INTELLECT AND THE SENSES

In aphorism 217 Nietzsche calls attention to the increasing role of the listener's intellect and the decreasing role of the senses. He claims that the listener's ears have become "intellectual," a change that he attributes to the extraordinary [*außerordentlich*] exercise of the listener's intellect. He seems to imply that the sense organs themselves are able to think, stating that "[t]he more capable of thought [*gedankenfähiger*] eye and ear become, the closer they approach the point at which they become unsensual [*unsinnlich*]" (HH 217). Using the consequences drawn from Nietzsche's hypothesis in aphorism 215, we can better understand his otherwise peculiar description of the sense organs.

As described above, the role of the intellect changed over the course of music's evolution. At an earlier stage in this evolution the intellect played no role when one listened to sounds unaccompanied by words. Instead, the listener simply sensed symbolically empty sounds, and reacted to such sounds based on whether they were pleasing or displeasing.²⁴ At a later stage, the listener began by means of association to attribute symbolic content to the sounds themselves. At this point, the listener no longer simply sensed symbolically empty sounds, but reacted both to the sensations created by these sounds, and the symbolic content attributed to these sounds; the listener became unable to separate sensing a sound from grasping its symbolic content. When Nietzsche refers to an "intellectual" ear or an ear "capable of thought," he is referring to the listener's inability to separate sensing a sound from understanding its symbolic content. However, Nietzsche's claim

²⁴ For example, a loud dissonant chord, independent of any symbolic content, would be displeasing because of the discomfort it causes the listener.

in aphorism 217 is not that the listener has become unable to separate sensing a sound from understanding the symbolic content of a sound. Rather, the key point is that the listener's intellect is becoming more and more active, which impacts both how the listener understands sounds, and how a listener senses sounds.

The increasing role of the intellect has two related consequences. First, with a more active intellect, the listener pays closer attention to the symbolic content of sounds, and increasingly values sounds based on whether they have pleasing symbolic content. The listener even actively searches out the content of a musical work. Second, the listener, increasingly focused on the symbolic content of sounds, focuses less on the sensations that the sounds produce. While the listener increasingly values sounds because he takes them to have symbolic content, he becomes increasingly indifferent to whether the sensations the sounds make are pleasurable or displeasurable. "For the moment we still believe: the world is uglier than ever, but it *signifies* a more beautiful world than there has ever been" (*HH* 217). Even admitting to the ugliness of the sensations that modern music brings about, Nietzsche notes that the modern listener does not care about the beauty of the sensations, but the beauty of what the sounds signify. The senses become instrumentally valuable to the intellect; the senses allow the listener to understand the symbolic content of sounds but are not valued because of the sensations they produce.

Two examples show how this change has impacted the listener. First, Nietzsche says, the listener is able to tolerate music that listeners with a less active intellect would have found unbearable. An active intellect allows a listener to understand and enjoy what symbolic content he believes he finds in music (such as sublimity [*Erhabene*]) even if the sounds produce displeasing sensations, such as in music that is much louder and full of dissonance. Listeners who would react to sounds based on the sensations they produce would have been unable to enjoy such music

because of the displeasurable sensations it makes and because they would not have understood its symbolic content. Second, with a more active intellect, the capabilities of the listener's senses have suffered. The listener is no longer able to make fine-grained distinctions in the sensations that sounds produce that listeners with less active intellects could distinguish, such as the difference between a C sharp and D flat.

Nietzsche claims that the senses are becoming "unsensual" because the sensations that sounds produce are becoming less important, and the senses are becoming valuable only insofar as they enable the viewer to understand the symbolic content of sound.

7 APHORISM 217: NIETZSCHE'S EVALUATION OF ABSOLUTE MUSIC

After discussing the changing role of the intellect and the senses, Nietzsche turns in aphorism 217 to the way such music affects how the listener values life. The modern listener with his active intellect focuses more on the symbolic content of sounds, and the enjoyment that he draws from music is based on what he takes the symbolic content of the music to be. At the same time, as the listener's senses become weaker, and he ascribes less significance to them, he relies on them less and becomes increasingly indifferent to the sensations music produces. Furthermore, the listener becomes less *able* to enjoy music based on the sensations it produces. Eventually, he is able to enjoy music only based on its symbolic content. Through this process the views of such thinkers such as E.T.A. Hoffmann may be understood in a new light. The increasing role of the intellect and decreasing role of the senses permit the listener to experience what seems to him to be an "absolute" expressed through music, and to be transported away from his sense-experience. The stage is set for absolute music to have its fullest impact.

At the end of aphorism 217 Nietzsche considers the next stage in the evolution of music. "Thus there is in Germany a twofold current of musical evolution: 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 the enormous majority growing every year more and more incapable of comprehending the meaningful even in the form of the sensually ugly.” Listeners are divided into two groups. The first, an ever-shrinking minority will continue to derive enjoyment from music based on what they think it signifies, its symbolic content. This symbolic content that music expresses will become more and more complex, which in turn will make it more and more difficult to understand, and an increasing number of listeners will be unable to understand the symbolic content of music. These confused listeners will soon try to enjoy the ugly sensations for their own sake, “learning to seize with greater and greater contentment the ugly and disgusting in itself, that is to say the basely sensual, in music” (*HH* 217).

7.1 The Enormous Majority

For the enormous majority, the only way they can enjoy music is by returning to the sensations that such music produces. However, they will also be unable to enjoy modern music in this regard. “[T]he more attenuated the fragrant odour of ‘significance’ becomes, the fewer there will be still able to perceive [*wahrnehmen*] it: and the rest will finally be left with the ugly, which they will try to enjoy directly—an endeavor in which they are bound to fail [*immer mißlingen muß*]” (*HH* 217). There are two main reasons why listeners who attempt to enjoy music based on the sensations it produces because they cannot understand what it conveys, are bound to fail. First, the music available and being produced at this time in Germany is displeasurable to the senses. Music had been composed for an audience with an active intellect. This means that music was created such that it had edifying symbolic content, often with the result that it was increasingly displeasurable, if not disgusting, to the senses. Listeners then, trying to enjoy music that they ceased to understand, are left with sensations that are ugly, that is, displeasing to the senses.

Second, the senses of most, if not all, listeners and humans in general have become blunt and feeble, such that listeners are unable to sense the various nuances that could allow one to enjoy music independent of its symbolic content. The majority of listeners have become people who can only search for and appreciate the symbolic content of music but are unable to appreciate the sensually beautiful. As a result, the two avenues by which one can enjoy music, by the sensations it produces and by the symbolic content it contains, are closed off to the majority.

7.2 The “Ten Thousand”

Whereas absolute music fails to help the enormous multitude of listeners affirm life because they are unable to understand its symbolic content, the elite “ten thousand” are able to understand music. However, simply understanding the symbolic content of absolute music does not help listeners affirm life. In fact, what they understand in music, the expression of an “absolute,” and the fact that they value this over sensible experience, shows that those who understand are no better off than those who do not.

Just as music inherited symbolic content from poetry in antiquity, so did music inherit symbolic content from Christianity throughout the Middle Ages and the following centuries. The issue at play then is not simply that music inherited symbolic content, but the specific kind of symbolic content it inherited from Christianity—the desire for some metaphysical reality beyond the sensible world in which we live, a precursor to the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche directly addresses this desire in “The Religious Life,” the chapter directly preceding his discussion of art and music. In aphorism 114 Nietzsche claims that at the basis of Christianity lies the rejection of oneself in favor of some divine ideal, a belief that animates all emotions and principles within Christianity. In modern music, this belief takes on a new content, the absolute; the desire for a divine ideal in Christianity becomes a desire for experiencing the “absolute” that transcends thoughts and

language through music. This transference of ideals from Christianity to music is by no means a thing of the past. Nietzsche points to the recent transference of religious ideals into music in aphorism 219, in which he notes how the Counterreformation, which brought about a “profoundly religious conversion” [*tiefreligiöse Umstimmung*] in humans, deeply changed the nature of *modern* music; modern music was born from the ascetic ideals which Nietzsche had just ascribed to Christianity. Absolute music, as a continuation of the ascetic ideal, is a symptom of a desire for a reality beyond the sensible world.

That his contemporary artists use music as a vehicle for ascetic ideals allows us to understand the full ramifications of Nietzsche’s description of the effect of absolute music in aphorism 217: “For the moment we still believe: the world is uglier than ever, but it *signifies* [*bedeutet*] a more beautiful world than there has ever been” (*HH* 217). The world signified by music’s symbolic content is not the sensible world, but an ideal world which the refined few eagerly pursue and enjoy by listening to absolute music. But the consequence of this is that the world in which they actually live, the sensible world, is rejected in favor of this ideal world.

Therefore, absolute music does not help these elite listeners in affirming life, but rather encourages their rejection of it in favor of some otherworldly ideal, of what seems to be an “absolute” that such listeners are now able to hear in the music in virtue of their tremendous intellects. However, even these dark consequences fail to register the full impact of Nietzsche’s concern with absolute music. An even more select group, the free spirits, those who can recognize the ascetic ideals hidden in music, are nevertheless tempted by absolute music to return to these ideals and revel in them. In aphorism 153 Nietzsche notes how the free spirit is enticed by the metaphysical urge by listening to music. The defining aspects that make such spirits free are

threatened by listening to such music, through which they are tempted to return to the enjoyment of music at the expense of life-affirming ideals.²⁵

Absolute music then tempts the very few remaining who might be able to challenge the rejection of life that it promulgates. Those that could affirm life by some other avenue are drawn back in and are encouraged to reject life with the help of absolute music.

8 CONCLUSION

This ominous consequence is what Nietzsche considers when he evaluates “absolute music.” “Absolute music” has become a form of music with extremely complex symbolic content, it produces few pleasurable sensations, and it brings a new persuasive voice to the ascetic ideal. Most are unable to enjoy what absolute music signifies and are forced to attempt to enjoy the displeasurable sensations it produces, but this will result in failure. Those that can understand and enjoy the symbolic content do not affirm life, but instead remain in thrall to the ascetic ideal, rejecting life in favor of some higher metaphysical reality. And the very few who may be able to challenge it, under which we may include Nietzsche himself, are continuously tempted to return to its ascetic ideals whenever they listen to it. This means that absolute music cannot help the listener affirm life, for there is nothing enjoyable he can draw from it to offset the suffering of life. Such music increasingly forces the listener to struggle with its meaning and its ugliness, leaving the listener disappointed and confused. The supposed beauty and transcendence such music aims to bring to the listeners either fails or encourages him to turn away from himself, and the listener

²⁵ In aphorism 153 Nietzsche uses Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as an example of music that tempts the free spirit. Due to the fact that it includes words in its fourth movement, it is not, strictly speaking, “absolute” music. However, I hold that it is not the fact that this music has words that makes it tempting, rather it, like many genuine pieces of absolute music, encourages following the ascetic ideal. Therefore, we should be permitted to consider any piece of absolute music as tempting the free spirit in a similar way.

is better off covering up his ears than attempting to gain something from it. Absolute music has become a dead-end for the affirmation of life.

With these ominous words I once again draw the reader's attention to Wagner. Even though Wagner tasked himself with saving music burdened by a Christian past, and at times claimed that he was overcoming absolute music, his music remains vulnerable to Nietzsche's critique. The *Musikdrama*, Wagner's "artwork of the future," does not in fact overcome absolute music. Instead, it is an inheritor of absolute music (of the long-established symbolic content present in music, which holds onto Christian values). Wagner's "new works," which attempt to combine sound and language, are in fact building on a basis of sound that is itself already impregnated with Christian values. Wagner's own *Musikdramen* then inevitably can only inherit, and not overcome such values. Not only does Wagner's work perpetuate the same values because the sounds with which the *Musikdrama* is built already contain implicit symbolic content derived from Christianity, but the listener still possesses an active intellect, causing him to listen for symbolic content and not pay attention to the impact of such works on his senses, contributing to his inability to affirm life even with supposedly revolutionary works of art.

However, before this point be taken too far, we must remind ourselves that Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner is derived from Wagner's *own* ideas. Far from being a wholesale rejection of Wagner, Nietzsche's critique of absolute music in *HH* is derived from Wagner's own hypothesis about the historical development of meaning in music. The fact that Nietzsche's attack on absolute music includes Wagner in its scopes does not establish a strict ideological break between Nietzsche had with this former friend, it only complicates it. We must look more carefully at the transition between *HH* and the works that precede it, ensuring that Nietzsche's break from Wagner does not lead us to believe that Nietzsche's views in *HH* are a break with all of Wagner's views. In fact, to

best understand this break, we must understand the Wagnerian-influenced views that Nietzsche *maintains* between earlier works such as *BT* and *HH*.

Some may be tempted still, seeing Nietzsche's rejection of absolute music and Wagner, to nevertheless claim that Nietzsche is urging for a different kind of music, one unburdened by otherworldly ideals and which could actually help listeners to affirm life. In line with this claim, the issue is not with absolute music in general, but with specific artists, such as Wagner and his predecessors. This view becomes problematic in light of the changing roles of the listener's intellect and senses described above, and the long-term historical development of these changes. I have already noted that Nietzsche's critique of absolute music does not simply address the music, but the construction of the listener's own intellect and senses; the listener now seeks out the symbolic meaning of music on his own. Therefore, changing the music alone would at the very least offer no immediate solution. What further makes the view that Nietzsche is only attacking certain artists suspect is the fact that the development and transition to absolute music is a process occurring over centuries, if not millennia. While discussing Nietzsche's historical treatment of morality in *HH*, Franco (2011) notes that even if one were to become aware of the conditions of morality's historical development, this would not thereby enable him to do away with this inheritance; one would still be subject to the various moral prejudices that have arisen over thousands of years. I would claim that this applies to art and the ideals that it propagates as well, especially when considering the connection Nietzsche draws between art and its connections to otherworldly ideals in *HH*. Just as one cannot simply disinherit the prejudices of morality, a historical development that itself can greatly change over another great stretch of history, so can one not delete the otherworldly prejudices of absolute music by making new pieces. A "new music" that would grace the stage of Bayreuth simply does not suffice, be it by Wagner or not.

Finally, I will note that this interpretation of Nietzsche creates certain issues for those who try to claim that Nietzsche is a thinker who prizes art and its ability to help us affirm life.²⁶ These interpretations emphasize either that Nietzsche's views about art in *HH* are a fluke which he abandons in later works or are not as extreme as I have presented them here. By following through Nietzsche's critique of absolute music, I have shown that far from attacking a few artists, Nietzsche's critique of absolute music draws upon his greater concern with otherworldly values inherited from Christianity and his examination of the intellectual and physiological make-up of the listener. Those who maintain that we should take Nietzsche as a supporter of art's ability to affirm life, at least in regard to music, must then demonstrate why we should dismiss Nietzsche's extreme view about absolute music in *HH*, even when it is tied to views that would motivate most of his later works, especially his critique of ascetic ideals. Those who wish to claim that his views about absolute music are not as extreme as I have presented them here must likewise show why we should take up Nietzsche's genealogical method and views on the sense-organs, both topics which will animate his later work as well, but discard his critique of absolute music. In either case, Nietzsche's critique of absolute music in *HH* offers a troubling account for his relationship to music, both in regard to how much he valued or distrusted music, and what positive or potentially nefarious role it plays in his continuous offensive against otherworldly values.

²⁶ Cf. Pothen (2002), Ridley (2007), and Meyer (2019) for examples of these views.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, R. Lanier (2017) “Friedrich Nietzsche”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
Ed. Zalta, Edward N., Accessed 18 July 2020,
<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/nietzsche/>>
- Ansell-Pearson, Keith (2018) *Nietzsche's Search for Philosophy: On the Middle Writings*.
Bloomsbury Publishing Academic.
- Bonds, Mark Evan (2014) *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea*. Oxford University Press.
- Dalhaus, Carl (1978) *Die Idee der absoluten Musik*. Bärenreiter-Verlag, Kassel.
- Dalhaus, Carl (1974) “Die doppelte Wahrheit in Wagners Ästhetik: Zu Nietzsches Fragment Über
Musik und Wort” in *Zwischen Romantik und Moderne: Vier Studien zur Musikgeschichte
des späteren 19. Jahrhunderts*, Musikverlag Emil Katzbichler, Munich.
- Franco, Paul (2011) *Nietzsche's Enlightenment: The Free Spirit Trilogy of the Middle Period*, The
University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Fürbeth, Oliver & Sorgner, Stefan Lorenz (2010) *Music in German Philosophy: An Introduction*.
Trans. Gillespie, Susan H., University of Chicago Press.
- Glass, Herbert (2020) “Orpheus”. Program Note for the LA Philharmonic Orchestra. Accessed 20
July 2020, <<https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/2571/orpheus>>
- Hanslick, Eduard (1986) *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution towards the Revision of the
Aesthetics of Music*. Trans. Payzant, Geoffrey, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis.
- Hoffman, E.T.A. (1977) “Ludwig van Beethoven, 5. Sinfonie” in *Schriften zur Musik: Aufsätze
und Rezensionen*. Winkler Verlag, Munich.
- Lampert, Laurence (2017) *What a Philosopher is: Becoming Nietzsche*, Chicago University Press,
Chicago.

- Meyer, Matthew (2019) *Nietzsche's Free Spirit Works: A Dialectical Reading*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Meyer, Theo (1993) *Nietzsche und die Kunst*, Francke Verlag Tübingen und Basel, Tübingen.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (2019) *Die Geburt der Tragödie in Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke und Briefe*. Available at: <http://www.nietzschesource.org/>
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (2019) *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches in Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke und Briefe*. Available at: <http://www.nietzschesource.org/>
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1999) *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Trans. Speirs, R., Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1996) *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. Trans. Hollingdale, R. J., Cambridge University Press.
- Pothen, Philip (2002) *Nietzsche and the End of Art*, Ashgate Publishing Company, Burlington, VT.
- Ridley, Aaron (2007) *Nietzsche on Art*, Routledge, London.
- Wagner, Richard (1983) *Dichtungen und Schriften*, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.
- Young, Julian (1992) *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.