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## Meditating on the Vitality of the Musical Object: A Spiritual Exercise Drawn from Richard Wagner's Metaphysics of Music

### Abstract:

In 1870, Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813–1883) wrote an essay to celebrate the centennial of Beethoven's birth. In this essay Wagner made the case that music is, unlike any other object we create or are attentive to in experience, in an immediate analogical relationship with the activity of the Schopenhauerian "will" and is always enlivened. By drawing on this idea, we can not only conceive of music as in an immediate analogical relationship with our personal experience, but as perhaps the only object of cognition that is in a constant state of personal vitality. It is by that very continuous vitality that it can return us to our own personhood with deeper insight and perspective. The essay concludes by exploring how attending to the musical object as a spiritual (existential) exercise might reconnect us to our roots in *sensus communis*, educate us on our common personhood, and play an ethical role in our lives.

### Keywords:

Richard Wagner, Arthur Schopenhauer, philosophy of music, spiritual exercise, German Idealism, Process Philosophy, Personalism

## Overture: The “Wagner Chord” for Our Reflection

“[Richard Wagner is] a man with a gigantic capacity for work, colossal industry and horrendous energy.”  
– Johannes Brahms<sup>1</sup>

Like its composer, Wagner’s music has a gigantic scope, industriousness, and horrendous energy. His musical works might be described as images of vitality, in all its beauty and havoc. It is this musical vitality that I wish to investigate. In this essay, I will meditate on Wilhelm Richard Wagner’s (1813–1883) idea, as articulated in his essay entitled *Beethoven*, that music is, unlike any other object we create or are attentive to in experience, in an immediate analogical relationship with the activity of the Schopenhauerian “will” (the aesthetic experience closest to the numinous). For Wagner, music is always enlivened. He further argued, that music gives the “most comprehensive idea of the world.” That is, music gives the most enriched articulation of the drama of the will in its dynamic activity. Such a metaphysics of music guided his great operatic works, works that fundamentally shaped the trajectory of Western music by their grand mythic narratives, organic systematicity, novel construction, fantastic images, and emotional depth. By drawing on Wagner’s idea, we can not only attend to music as in an immediate analogical relationship with our personal experience, but as perhaps the only object of cognition that is in a constant state of personal vitality. It is by that very continuous vitality that music can return us to our own personhood with deeper insight and perspective. I conclude this essay by exploring how attending to the musical object can be a spiritual (existential) exercise in reconnecting to our roots in *sensus communis*, educating ourselves on our common personhood, and supporting our ethical relations with others.

To understand the genesis and nature of this idea about the musical object a bit must be said about its composer. Wagner was a master dilettante, a voracious reader of works on the historical origins of Western myth, a powerful voice in the polemic debates of his day, a shaper of the trajectory of music composition and theory, and even a contributor to idealistic philosophy. He created what he called in his early career *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total works of art), that is, opera as drama guiding discursive poesis, instrumental music, plastic art, and dance (all other art forms). Wagnerian operas slowly coordinate *leitmotifs* (a leading musical phrase-motif for people, places, and ideas) over a significant duration (several hours in clock time), until one is led to an event where they all coalesce to illuminate the ontological depths of archetypal events in humanity’s personal experience. Of special importance, however, was instrumental music. Wagner would later in his career argue that Beethoven was the prophet and paragon of the musician/composer whose task is to return us to the direct activity of the will through the musical object. Wagner saw himself as the direct inheritor of this German prophetic lineage, heralding a new age in musical art which would lead to a revolution in culture. Nietzsche would infamously defend Wagner’s position in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

He is also a person of infamy in the history of Western culture. He could be deceptive, manipulative, petty, cruel, vindictive, emotionally abusive, narcissistic, dogmatic, deeply anti-Semitic and racist, and even dangerous when given power and a loyal following. His “horrendous energy” was shaped by, but not reducible to, all these habits of his character. It is all too easy to cast Wagner off for all that made him harmful to those near to him. Further, it is even easier to say that Wagner is but the decadence of Romanticism, and that his music and views were a perfect tool for emerging, proto-fascist German nationalism, as Nietzsche would argue after the demise of their friendship.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as with Heidegger in philosophy, to cast off the legacy of such

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1) As quoted in John Deathridge, “Introduction” in *Wagner Handbook*, edited by Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. John Deathridge (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), xi.

2) For more, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche Contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., trans. Anthony

a polemic figure neither rids us of the darker aspects of their work, nor helps us have the discussion we need to have about it. Ignoring these legacies also does not help us draw out cautious insight from their problematic creations. Honest, unapologetic, critical exploration is what is called for at this time. Without denying who he was or committing to a fruitless and obnoxious apology for Wagner, I will proceed forward with caution.

For the purposes of this essay it is also important to note that I am not a Wagner scholar,<sup>3</sup> and I am only a dilettante in the world of classical music. Further, as Carl Dahlhaus, one of the most prominent Wagner scholars in the world has quipped, “the literature on Wagner is legion.”<sup>4</sup> My reflection here should not be interpreted as an attempt at Wagner scholarship. That kind of work is best left to those with more expertise. I could hardly have much to contribute to such a layered and expansive field of scholarship. I thus will take no position on critical questions in the scholarship on Wagner’s philosophy, such as the exact lengths to which he borrowed from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, or the exact ontological status of music in relationship to the dynamism of the will. In short, this essay is not meant to provide context for, nor enter into, the debates of Wagner scholarship.

That said, even without the eye of an expert there is much to draw upon in Wagner’s essay *Beethoven* for other purposes beyond that of scholarship in the history of philosophy. Close reading and reflection can offer a kind of personal insight that is helpful for self-cultivation. The same is true of reading *midrash*, the interpretation of one close reader in deep relation with one text. Such a singular presence alongside close reading can be of immense value for clear and distinct meditation on a single topic. While it is important to recognize that good scholarship can deepen the insights we might glean from solitary close reading, sometimes a close attentiveness to a text without the distraction of other voices and insights, staying with oneself and perhaps one other voice, is of abiding value. We cultivate an immediate sense of the text and of a singular interpretation that is not confused by other voices with other agendas and needs. Once this sense is settled it can be later enriched by the wisdom of more experienced councilors. I thus ask you my reader to treat me as a solitary companion in the utilization of Wagner’s *Beethoven*. My writing here is *midrash*, a source for meditating on the musical object. This source for meditation can be enriched and modified by Wagner scholarship and other meditations on musical objects. I hope it has value to itself as a resource for self-cultivation and as an incitement to scholarship.

In the following, we draw upon a close reading of Wagner’s essay *Beethoven* in order to meditate on the musical object as a potential image for contemplation and self-cultivation. In particular, we seek to draw out for our own purposes one of the most interesting threads of the work: Wagner’s suggestion that music is the only constantly vital object of human cognition. I offer to you a reflective study of how Wagner’s idea – as articulated in his essay *Beethoven* – of music as a vital object might be of value to us today as a kind of spiritual exercise, or practice of self and communal cultivation.<sup>5</sup> Once we reject Wagner’s egotistical, imperialized view of ultimacy, his idea can serve better recognizing, treating, and engaging with other persons. Further, if we treat Wagner’s idea as an opportunity for spiritual exercise in self-cultivation, a new relation to other persons emerges.

In the first sections of this reflection, I very briefly sketch Wagner’s relationship to and reconstruction of Schopenhauerian metaphysics. In the following section, I summarize the main points of his theory of the vital

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M. Ludovici (Edinburgh and London: T.N. Foulis, 1911).

3) For studies from scholars of Wagnerian philosophy, see Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, new edition, foreword by Slavoj Žižek, Radical Thinkers Series (London and New York: Verso, 2009); Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002); Julian Young, *The Philosophies of Richard Wagner* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

4) Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whitthall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1.

5) For more, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: From Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 79–144.

musical object in his essay *Beethoven*. In the final section, I argue that even without endorsing the views of ultimacy embedded in Wagner's Schopenhauerian metaphysics, we can still learn something from him about the nature of music as a temporal,<sup>6</sup> dynamic, and personal object.<sup>7</sup> We can then also feel the power of attending to the musical object as a spiritual exercise in the recognition of personhood in the cosmic becoming.

### Act I: Wagner Finds a Book

In order to better reflect on Wagner's claims about the musical object, we begin with a review of the main points of Arthur Schopenhauer's (1788–1860) *The World as Will and Representation (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung)*.<sup>8</sup> As is well known, Schopenhauer argued that Kant's thing-in-itself (*Ding-an-Sich*) was nothing but the "will." Schopenhauer thought that Kant had missed this insight because he had not been able to go beyond his own self-set limitations in order to explore the implications of the very interior world he had so thoroughly analyzed.

As Kant had suggested to him, the numinous is a functional category for whatever outruns our cognitive powers, and by the end of his *Third Critique*, we realize that we as persons outrun ourselves. We are more than our determinate cognition of ourselves. It is this insight, among others, that gave Schopenhauer an idea. If whatever outruns our cognitive powers is not mediated from us in-itself, but via the activity of creatures such as ourselves cognitivizing the world (i.e. creating representation [*vorstellung*]), and if this "undivided but divisible"<sup>9</sup> whole includes the deeper vitality of ourselves that we cannot access by mediation, it stands to reason that the force of our cognitivizing *activity* is the expressed aspect of that deeper current of ourselves that is the thing-in-itself. The unity outside of the limits of human intuition must include humans and *be* that activity that humans feel within themselves but cannot access through determinate judgment. In other words, that activity that is mediating the world into representation is the numinous. He names that activity, "the will." It is that energy which unceasingly can and does mediate the world as a force, including mediating us from it. Keeping in mind that the will-in-itself is an undifferentiated but divisible whole, which in its activity mediates the world, we can see that it is not us as individuals that mediate the world, but the will that individuates us. We are just another, albeit more complex and cunning, version of its mediating activity. The will is then just that vital energy (will-to-life) in the universe of which so called individuals (including but not limited to ourselves) are but phenomena, objectifications.<sup>10</sup> Schopenhauer claimed that music had the closest relationship with the activity of the will. Further, "because music does not, like all the other arts, exhibit the Ideas or grades of the will's objectification, but directly the will itself, we can also explain that it acts directly on the will, i.e., the feelings, passions, and emotions of the hearer, so that it quickly raises these or even alters them."<sup>11</sup> Since music escapes the levels of mediation that all the other arts go through, it is freer to more directly speak to and affect us.

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6) By "nature" I do not mean the technical Kantian term for the realm of possible experience, but as "the function or purpose of something," Wagner often uses *Natur* in this colloquial sense, that is closer to the Greek sense of *phusis*.

7) By "object" I do not mean, in the German Idealistic sense an *Objekt* but a *Gegenstand* or a cognized quantum of explanation.

8) Hereinafter WW&R,

9) I borrow this term from Alfred North Whitehead. For more on the "undivided, divisible" in Whitehead's corpus, see Randall Auxier and Gary Herstein, *The Quantum of Explanation: Whitehead's Radical Empiricism* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 112–142, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315204925>.

10) In the second and third editions of *WWR*, Schopenhauer explored whether the will was the numinous itself, or merely its most immediate expression.

11) Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, vol. 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 448.

It is this very anecdote of Schopenhauer's on the metaphysical status of music that so excited Wagner. Schopenhauer began to receive a wider readership after the publication of his expanded edition of *WW&R* in 1844. A decade later, in 1854 Wagner would read this edition of the book, and become convinced that Schopenhauer was the first person who recognized the true metaphysics of music, and for that matter the first who had resolved the central problems of philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Wagner would start a correspondence with Schopenhauer, one in which Wagner played the role (for perhaps the only time of his life) of the enamored and obsequious student. Schopenhauer remained in contact, though he was never as enthusiastic about the relationship. *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* are the two operas considered most clearly influenced by Schopenhauer. Wagner's metaphysics of music, although inspired by Schopenhauer, is anachronistic. Schopenhauer saw Wagner's work as an entire theory built out of anecdotes from the appendices to *WW&R* that were meant to illustrate far more significant points. Wagner's metaphysics of music should thus be read as a creative reconstruction of Schopenhauerian philosophy, and not one that was endorsed by the master.

### *Intermezzo: Musical Objects*

Before we proceed to a close reading of Wagner's essay *Beethoven*, a very brief interlude will help us better appreciate its approach to music. The "musical object" for Wagner was not the musician, the written score, or even our auditory capacity. Beethoven created and cognized many musical objects well after he lost his hearing. Music itself is an object of cognition (in the Kantian sense), in other words, a part of the manifold of sense conformable to cognition in accordance with the categories, and an experience about which (at least some) determinate judgments can be made. Music however is not a thing, in the traditional sense of substance metaphysics (pre-Kantian), but an objectivizing function we experientially transact with (and sometimes create) through our activity in and of the world. As with other intelligible characteristics of the manifold of sense, music conforms to human objectivating (cognitive) processes. For example, Beethoven's "Symphony Number 9 in D-Minor" is an object that we as subjects are capable of experiencing, conforming to the requirements of the pure intuitions of space and time, and synthesizing in acts of judgment. The musical object's life may be extremely intense and unstable, but it is nevertheless real. One could say the same of human life, or, as Kant says explicitly, of the "feeling" of being alive.<sup>13</sup> We experience it, both in others and ourselves (although differently), as an extremely intense and unstable, but real, duration.

### *Act 2: The Prophecy of Beethoven*

Only to be able to *play* in those conventional forms with the enormous resources of music, in such that its proper effect, the manifestation of the inner essential nature of all things, was avoided like the danger of an inundation, passed along, in the judgment of aestheticians, for the true and only gratifying product of the cultivation of the art of music. But to have penetrated through these forms to the inmost nature of music in such a way that he was able from this side to throw the inner life of the clairvoyant outward again, in order to display these forms to us anew in accordance with

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12) For more, see Hartmut Reinhardt, "Wagner and Schopenhauer," in *Wagner Handbook* edited by Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. John Deathridge (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 287.

13) For example, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 202–203 [§54, 331–332].

their inner significance only, this was the work of our great Beethoven, whom we must therefore represent to ourselves as the true paragon of the musician.<sup>14</sup>

In 1870, ten years after the death of Schopenhauer, Wagner was a rising star. He felt himself to be at the height of his craft and would soon bring to life his Ring Cycle (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) at Bayreuth. At this moment in his career, he wrote an essay to celebrate the centennial of Beethoven's birth. In the essay, Beethoven becomes a representative of a sort of prophetic genius (in a sense to be explained), who was able to call forth from the inner world the dynamic coordination of a musical object.<sup>15</sup> In order to properly explain Beethoven's genial, "clairvoyant" capacities, Wagner spent about thirty pages expanding upon what he considered to be Schopenhauer's formative insight into the metaphysics of music.

In the essay, Wagner defined music as "the revelation of the inmost dream-image of the essential nature of the world,"<sup>16</sup> and argued, among many other points, that music thus gives the "most comprehensive idea of the world."<sup>17</sup> Music has such comprehensive power because it has an immediate vital access to the will, and can articulate for us the experience of the drama of the will in its dynamic activity. Wagner also argued that the dynamic creativity of music reveals the quality of certain experiences pulled from the composer's/musician's life, but that are not reducible to those experiences.<sup>18</sup>

Key to Wagner's metaphysics of music is Schopenhauer's distinction between our awareness of the *intensive* interiority of ourselves as *will*, and of the *extensive* understanding of "spatiotemporal objects" (that we can come to recognize as petrified modes of *will*). The spatializing function of representing things for our understanding to act on, stifles our ability to note the dynamic activity of the will. In line with Schopenhauer, Wagner thought that by returning to our own interiority we can catch the will in dynamic action.<sup>19</sup>

Following this distinction, Wagner continues with Schopenhauer into the realm of dreams, or the interior activity of the will cut off from a direct means of externalization. Wagner noted that sometimes in this dream world – the world of the will (our teleological desire) trapped in-itself beyond the limits of the Kantian formal intuition of time and space – we are driven to an "erotically" driven cry of frustration, that propels through our action-giving embodiment, which then awakens us from our sleep.

If we now regard the *cry* in all diminutions of its violence to the tender utterance of desire, as the fundamental element of all human manifestations to the hearing, and if we are compelled to find in it the most immediate of all utterances of the will, through which it turns toward the external world most quickly and most surely, we have less occasion to wonder at the immediate intelligibility of music, than at an art's arising from this element; as it is evident, on the other hand, that both artistic productivity, and artistic intuition can only proceed from the alienation of consciousness from the excitations of will.<sup>20</sup>

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14) Richard Wagner, *Beethoven*, trans. Albert R. Parsons (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1872), 40–41.

15) For more on Wagner's views on Beethoven, see Klaus Kropfinger, *Wagner and Beethoven: Richard Wagner's Reception of Beethoven*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511627262>.

16) Wagner, *Beethoven*, 111.

17) Reinhardt, "Wagner and Schopenhauer," 290.

18) Wagner, *Beethoven*, 19–21.

19) *Ibid.*, 26–29.

20) *Ibid.*, 31.

In this view, the “cry upon waking” reveals an immediate expression of the will. It is not primarily caused by our transactions with the world, but comes from the intensity of our own inner life that tears the world in its monadic depth asunder, and again veils us in the smoke of the world of representation (the world of awakened consciousness and action).

“The cry’s” key aspect is its volitional rupturing of the world. It is not music but reveals its analogical function. Wagner believed that alongside the world of sight was one of *sound*.<sup>21</sup> Music’s true nature, in the world of sound, immediately analogizes our intensive inner life and the way it breaks into the world of representation. Music should *feel like* the way the cry authentically emerges and breaks into the narrow world of waking life.<sup>22</sup> Music should also return us to the depths of ourselves, from which “the cry” emanates. The genius of musical art requires creating *vital* objects that return us to our inner realm, which for most of us is lost in the act of representing (and living) in the highly spatialized visual realm. Artists for Wagner sense this alienation from ourselves and seek to help us return to ourselves. Wagnerian opera libretti are metaphors of this deep and problematic distance and rupture between inner life and external expression. These libretti have compact simple prose, with tight rhyme structures, that are felt as the crest of the wave of musical activity. The libretto is the analogy of the vocal release of “the cry” as it breaks into the world of representation, while its *leitmotifs* are analogies of the inner world from which it emerged. Thus, the voices of the singers both articulate discursive thought and are the expression of the inner reality of the singers manifesting itself in waking life, joined to the wind (spirit) of the horns and the beating “hearts” of the percussionists. But one is supposed to be able to interpret a Wagnerian opera without knowing the German language and without seeing the staging and acting – the music is supposed to be self-sufficient in its dynamic intelligibility. The words and stage performance, as we shall see, excite and bewitch us to return to ourselves.

It is this supposed direct, analogical relation of great music to our inner life as it expresses itself (which belongs to the fundamental energy of the universe) that gives the musical object its supposed superiority to the “objects” of the more spatialized (static or mechanical) world represented to our cognition. Further, it is supposed to offer us as listeners a form of direct non-discursive intelligibility:

The outer world speaks to us with such incomparable intelligibility here, because, by virtue of the effect of sound, it communicates to us through hearing precisely what we call out to it from the depths of our soul. The object of the tone which is heard, coincides immediately with the subject of the emitted tone; we understand without any intermediation through conceptions what is said to us by the cry for help, or of morning or joy, which we hear, and answer it at once in the corresponding sense. If the cry, or sound of sorrow or delight which we ejaculate, is the most immediate expression of the emotions of our will, we understand *similar sounds* which make their way to us through hearing, as incontestably the utterance of the same emotions — and no illusion, as

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21) *Ibid.*, 29.

22) Wagner is part of a heated debate in Schopenhauerian aesthetics, as to whether music has direct identity with the will or if it can put us in the most immediate relationship with the will of any of the arts. Wagner took the latter view. Another aspect of this debate is whether music belongs to the soul or is the soul, and is then expressed in nature, or, on the other hand, whether music gives an analogy to our lived embodiment. In this second aspect of the debate, Wagner believed music touches the soul, though is not soul itself. Music is still an object (as *Gegenstand*) but is special because of its unstable and highly intensive nature. It is not pure will, but an exhibition that returns us to the will. For an example of some aspects of this debate, see Sandra Shapshay, “Schopenhauer’s Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art,” *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 1 (January 2012), 11–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2011.00453.x>.

in the semblance of light, to the effect that the fundamental nature of the world external to us, is not completely identical with our own essential nature, is possible here, by which the gulf that to the sight seems to exist at once vanishes.<sup>23</sup>

Upon observation, we can find the will breaking into representation in a variety of our immediate vocal ejaculations. Music is the object of cognition which dissolves the gap between vital energy and expression. An *ideal* listener will immediately *feel* in music the origins of the tones in their corresponding noumenal energies. By this analogical process, the illusion of a gulf between our representations and will vanish, and we find ourselves in a cosmic becoming, an undivided but divisible, whole reality. The *true* musical object makes intelligible a deeper reality as it underlies, is continuous with, and creates the veil of representation. When we become attentive to the musical object, the obfuscation of the “veil of maya,” the disrupting of reality by the organization of the will, which then bifurcates the world as we can experience it from the world itself, is lifted. Music in fact is supposed to align us to the rhythm of the continuous activity of the cosmic becoming, both as pure will and rupturing representation. Such intelligibility can only be made clear from an experience that is not so thoroughly lost in the world of representation. Wagner (in line with Kant) thus suggests something quite radical: certain kinds of intelligibility (what Kant would call aesthetic ideas<sup>24</sup>) come to us not through clarity of rational thought, but by saturated aesthetic experiences. We learn certain important aspects about the world long before we can rationalize them in discourse (if we can rationalize them at all).

Good music for Wagner is also not about a mere “interested liking” in the Kantian sense, but reaches down to something far more primal.<sup>25</sup> It is not a matter of individual preference. At its best, it returns us to our deepest “self,” which is not really a self at all but the universal becoming. If one cannot access the sublimity in Beethoven’s music, it is not a lack in Beethoven’s work, for many people *do* experience such an intense return to a deeper dynamic pulse when listening to those musical objects. Given that this experience is *actual* for many people, it must be genuinely *possible* for others to access the power of those musical objects. Our musical interests (“tastes” in the current sense of that concept) are different. But that is not to say that *certain* musical pieces (great works) do not have the special capacity (“universally” in the sense of possibility) to return and align people with their own becoming. Idealistic, subjective universality does not require that everyone agrees on the power of a piece of music. Rather, it accounts for how people who, having such experiences with particular musical works, feel in the *as if* the universal capacity of others to have such an experience.<sup>26</sup> Wagner, unless discussing the history of human failures to understand the nature of music, almost always treated the musical object as experienced by an ideally situated listener and performer. In addition, Wagner was not denying that there are limits to cognition in the world of sound. To the contrary, he even

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23) Wagner, *Beethoven*, 34–35. My emphasis.

24) For more on “aesthetic ideas” see Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 182 [§49, 314]. Also, see my essay “Utopia as the Gift of Ethical Genius: Ernst Cassirer’s Theory of Utopia,” *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 2, no. 1 (3) (April 2018): 96–108.

25) Schopenhauer and Wagner distinguished themselves from Kant who thought music was the lowest of the fine arts, if a fine art at all, as it was the hardest one to disengage from the body; thus, interestedness is impossible to get rid of in music. For more, see Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 189–195 [§51]. Schopenhauer and Wagner thought this interestedness reveals music’s immediate purposiveness so analogous to our own. Music is beautiful, not because it side-steps determinate judgment which helps us come to a reflective relationship with our own freedom, but because it beguiles us to withdraw into our own primal purposeful activity. For them, music draws us to more than animal like pleasure (as Kant thought). Rather it takes us deeper into it, to our deepest pulsating energies as living creatures. It is perhaps better called the most “primal art”, rather than a fine art.

26) Kant’s discussion of the distinction between “interested likings” and “subjective universal judgements”, like that of the beautiful in the “Analytic of the Beautiful” in the *Critique of Judgment*, largely framed the idealistic theory of aesthetics that Wagner draws from in this essay. For more, see *Ibid.*, 43–91 [§1–22].

went as far as to suggest that there are *a priori* laws that govern making true exhibitions of a musical object that gives the most comprehensive idea of the world.<sup>27</sup>

He was suggesting that music, to the ideally situated listener, is in direct analogical relation with our *limited* volitional activity and aligns us with the deeper currents of that activity. Music can “stay alive” in its own limited way because it is *felt* as an immediate relation (a concrete analogy) of our inner connection to reality, while objects further into the outer realm of representation at best can be constantly re-enlivened by their purposefully purposive beauty. For Wagner, the musical object goes beyond most other arts and gives us access to sublimity (to the will as *noumenon*). In this view, plastic arts merely remind us of our own sublimity through their beauty and/or form, and are at best a mere ode to the beauty of nature. For example, sculpture and painting are a much further graduation of the will into representation, created in the past to remind us of the *natural* dynamism of ourselves. Music is less lost in the realm of representation, and thus is in a more immediate and vital analogy, some even say “identity”, with that activity of nature as it is naturing (*natura naturans*). “If, then, we see an art arise from the immediate consciousness of the unity of our inner nature with that of the external world, it is in the very first place evident that that art must be subject to aesthetic laws entirely different from those of every other art.”<sup>28</sup> Music spans a unity that includes, but is not limited to the realm of representation, and thus it should not be reduced to the techniques that appeal merely to that realm. Thus, the guidelines for making a visual object *feel* organic and alive ought to be different than for an object that sings our sublimity directly into the world. No attempt at creating static semblances of natural activity is supposed to be needed. That said, music has to be coordinated in such a way that it can clearly illuminate, beyond the veil of *maya*, the depth of the will of which it analogizes (according to Wagner) immediately.

Wagner derisively and caustically attacked the many musical traditions, from different nations in Europe, in his era that he thought treated music as if it was an object that belonged to the plastic arts (that use largely spatial representations, and that are very degraded forms of will), focusing on the play of musical structures for the sake of enjoyable entertainment. In this view, Beethoven was a genius because he oracularly intuited and manifested the true nature of music as a vital, primarily temporal object that can return us to our own becoming and sublimity (to our experience of our supersensible existence in its systole and diastole). For Wagner, this insight was at the heart of the German spirit.

When musicians (at their best) become attuned with the dynamics of the will, they have, according to Wagner, a rapture only surpassed by the saint. The saint, however, stays in the ecstasy, while the musician only has moments of such experience. The audience members’ vision, when in sympathy with a piece of music are, Schellingianly “depotentialized;”<sup>29</sup> they ignore the oddities of the players, of the scene, of a friend sneezing during the *recitative*, and enter the “idea of the world” immediately felt in sound. We participate in the magic of the musician/composer when engaged in this activity. “From this world, which otherwise we have no means of portraying, the musician, by the disposition of his tones, in a certain measure spreads a net for us, — or again, he besprinkles our perceptive faculties with the miracle-working drops of his sounds,

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27) See Wagner, *Beethoven*, 107.

28) *Ibid.*, 35.

29) Wagner’s work was also influenced by other neo-Kantian Idealists, but often indirectly. For example, the work of Schelling. This influence is in spite of the fact that when he was young, Wagner only read the first few pages of the *System of Transcendental Idealism* before he was befuddled and quickly gave up on it in order to return to his ninth symphony. Richard Wagner, *My Life*, vol. 1 (*Academia.edu*, 2010). He probably got most of his Schelling through the filter of other neo-Kantian and romantic sources. For a partial overview of the relationship between neo-Kantian Idealism and philosophy of music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Mark Evan Bonds, “Idealism and the Aesthetics of Instrumental Music at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50, no. 2/3 (1997): 387–420, <https://doi.org/10.2307/831839>.

in such a manner that they are incapacitated, as if by magic, for the reception of any impressions other than those of our own inner world.”<sup>30</sup>

But how do these “magic drops” make us so receptive? How does the musical communication happen between composers/musicians and audience? Further, how do these “foreign impressions” give us insight into our own inner world, if they are not of ourselves? The answer for Wagner lies in the manipulation of “ideas of time” (and here only as the most external structuring of music), instead of playing with ideas “of space,” that is, analogically luring us to what Bergson called “real duration”<sup>31</sup> through the use of tones:

But in this approach [to the inner world] he [the composer/musician] comes in contact with ideas of *time* only, as the most external element in his communication, while he keeps ideas of space under an impenetrable veil, the lifting of which would necessarily at once render the dream-image which he views unrecognizable. While the *harmony* of tones, which belongs neither to time nor space, remains the most proper element of music, the musician, now actively shaping, extends his hand, to establish a common understanding as it were, toward the waking world of phenomena, through the rhythmical succession of time in his manifestations, just as the allegorical dream is connected with the usual ideas of the individual in such a way that the waking consciousness which is turned toward the external world, though recognizing the great difference of this dream-image also, from the occurrences of the actual life, is able, nevertheless, firmly to retain it. Through the *rhythmical* disposition of his tones, the musician at once comes in contact, in a certain measure, with the intuitional plastic world, i.e., by virtue of the similarity of the laws in accordance with which the motion of the visible bodies is intelligibly manifested to our intuition. Human gestures, which endeavor in the dance to make themselves intelligible through expressively alternative, and regulated motion, seem consequently to be *that* for music, that bodies, again, are for light, which without refraction against them wouldn't illumine, while we may say that without rhythm music would not be perceptible to us.<sup>32</sup>

Only in “real duration and repetition,” which is not time as sequence, as the form of inner sense (but which uses time to provide a kind of intelligible order, which could be likened to number), can the musician/composer find components for analogies to use through the harmony of tones. These tones can guide analogies across both the cognition we have of our spatial/visual outer world and of our durational/felt inner world. They guide the pattern of rhythmic repetition which we (the audience) can then use as hypnotic points of analogy to return to our inner world as it expresses itself, with new continuity, alignment, and appreciative insight. This process works like the process by which the “usual ideas” we have and see in allegorical dreams are analogous enough to waking life for us to communicate them (at least sometimes) and find insight in them, even if they cannot be exhausted by our own interpretations. The repetition in rhythm is manipulated by tones in a unifying analogy between patterns in the usually bifurcated realms of will and representation.

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30) Wagner, *Beethoven*, 43.

31) For example, see Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. Frank Lubecki Pogson (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), chapter II.

32) Wagner, *Beethoven*, 44–45.

In the final section of the first part of the essay, Wagner offered an interesting and complex critique of Kant,<sup>33</sup> which I will not give an analysis of here, but hope to explore in a future work.<sup>34</sup> For now, it suffices to note that Wagner's famous *leitmotifs* are for him more than an existential psychology playing underneath a libretto (which is how opera enthusiasts and music commentators usually treat it). The *leitmotifs* are a part of his musical, metaphysical method of bringing us inward to the rhythmic drama of reality, via the object that gives us the most comprehensive idea of the world; the object that best catches the rhythm of the will in its activity.

### Act 3: Music's Magic

Today, Schopenhauer's metaphysics in its classical formulation is certainly not the most appealing and or empirically satisfying account of reality. One will find very few Schopenhauerian metaphysicians still talking about "will" as the name for ultimate reality. Is there anything then that can be taken from Wagner's account of the musical object, without committing to this view of ultimacy? The post-idealistic Process and Continental traditions of philosophy have taken up the task of a refined vitalist theory of music. Henri Bergson is exemplary in both philosophical traditions of recovering a vitalist theory of music.<sup>35</sup> Throughout his career, Bergson argued that music's rhythmic impulsions are *suggestive*, as opposed to being necessarily directly *expressive*, of certain intensive psychic states of duration. It is music's tantalizing analogy to our inner life that gives music its power.<sup>36</sup> Bergson would agree with Wagner that music "depotentializes" our normal mode of spatialization by its suggestiveness of our inner intensive life in its deepest aspects as cosmic becoming. He also shared with Schopenhauer and Wagner a vitalist theory that spaces are created by the active impulsions of activity (*elan vital*) in the universe. Unlike Schopenhauer and Wagner, Bergson was not certain of the ultimate status of such vital energy (hence preferring the term "vital force" denoting the expression of the process, not its ultimate nature), nor did he think renunciation of the purposive drive was the solution to the problem of life (he criticized "finalism" as vigorously as he criticized "mechanism"). Like Bergson, we can admire what the vital musical object suggests of our inner lives. We even can go so far as to state that the vital musical object tells us *something* about the nature of the activity of the universe, while recognizing that we do not have ultimate authority on the nature or a soteriology of that activity.

If we meditate on this idea through the perspective of philosophical personalism, we can go beyond Schopenhauer, Wagner, and even Bergson, and suggest a little bit more about the musical object. If the vital musical object (at its best) can, as a spiritual exercise, return us to our own personal experience, to the deepest valued and most meaningful aspects of our creaturely existence, and can align us with a *vital* cosmic becoming in which we participate, it then perhaps shares a special relation with the sublimity of person. A painting of a countryside may return us to a previous or new interior state, but it does so through a beautiful spatial analogy. Music, at its best, does not work its purposive power on us via a spatial memory, especially to the trained listener, but by tones that align us to the rhythm of the purposive feeling of *being* a person. Some may say, as Schopenhauer did, that being drawn to the fundamental experience of the will is impersonal, and is spiritual training in the very pinnacle of impersonalizing, as we dissolve ourselves into that cosmic becoming. A more Kantian view

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33) Although he never named Kant directly, I have strong suspicions that a critique of Kantian aesthetics is implicit throughout that section. More research needs to be done to confirm my current suspicions.

34) Wagner, *Beethoven*, 47–51.

35) Suzanne Langer is another exemplary example. For more, see Suzanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

36) For example, see Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 40, 65.

would emphasize the opposite view – only the moral law is sublime, and only because it is experienced by us in our own person, our autonomy, and symbolized for us in the presence of the other person. The argument between Kantian and Schopenhauerian views would be protracted. But a personalized, Bergsonian view goes through the horns of the dilemma. Music, and all that is vital, is personal under certain conditions of time and history, including human experience, and is an exercise in recognizing the vital, becoming of person, that we experience only through and as a part of a community of persons. We recognize our position in a greater community of persons that are the flower and the chorus of the vital cosmic becoming. Music perhaps then can withdraw the gap between ourselves and other persons, and we can then align ourselves with the living, dynamic *sensus communis*. We can feel the unity of person that underlies our symbolically mediated relationships with each other.

Wagner's "Prelude" to *Tristan und Isolde* does not only make us remember a vision of a moment of tragic love, but it seeks to help us participate in the personal depths of tragic love in all of its intensity.<sup>37</sup> We can do this even if we have not experienced such love ourselves, because the magic rain of music can guide us to the rhythms of *sensus communis*, of the shared personhood in which we participate and which provides us insight we never knew we had into our supersensible character and vocation.

For all Wagner's ethical failures, a deeply ethical conclusion can be drawn from his suggestions about the vital musical object. By training ourselves to attune to the musical object, we can not only illuminate our vitality, but can return to the sublimity of our shared personhood, to the collective source from which we recognize what it means to be a person. From that training we can realize that music has an ethical power to align us to realms of our personal lives we share with others but cannot fully bring to rational discourse. Wotan's and Brünhilde's duet at the end of *Die Walküre* gives us access to an incredibly rich vista of personal feeling between father and grown daughter. We learn, in a way we could never fully capture in reasoned discourse, about the complexity of the parental love for children who become independent persons onto themselves. The depth of recognition for our shared personhood is deepened. These insights transcend the idiosyncratic and become a source for feeling the possibilities of personhood, while remaining accessible to unique individuals who deviate from them in various ways.

On the other hand, music also has the power to subvert our feelings to one aspect of the world and one community of persons, excluding and dismissing the dignity of others. Hitler saw in *Tänhauser* a potential narrow, but compelling vista of the nature of the German spirit. The Nazi's would use the magic of that music as a political technique to lure the live feelings in the people of Germany of that era and create a single horizon of meaning that systematically excluded other horizons of meaning. In this way, music helped erase the existence of other persons. Ernst Cassirer in his *Myth of the State* and a collection of other twentieth century philosophers and scholars warned us of the power of myth and its beguiling music.<sup>38</sup> It is easy for music to make us feel alive as part of a community, but it is all too easy for that community to be considered the exclusive one of value. Once we think music is done revealing to us who counts as persons, we are in dangerous waters.

Music can both deceive and dominate our vision of others and open us up to the dignity of the plurality of personhood. The ancients, and especially Plato, knew the gifts and dangers of music for our ethical and political lives. We too should continue to take music seriously, not just as an object of aesthetic and psychological power, but as an object of deep metaphysical and ethical import.

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37) And one assumes that taking the finite form of personhood is a condition for just this kind of feeling.

38) For more, see Paulina Sosnowska, "The Reinforcement of Political Myth? Hans Blumenberg, Hannah Arendt and the History of the Twentieth Century," *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 3, no. 2 (8) (July 2019): 51–61, <https://doi.org/10.14394/eidos.jpc.2019.0017>.

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