

Liébert, Georges. *Nietzsche and Music*, translated by David Pellauer and Graham Parkes. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Georges Liébert's *Nietzsche and Music* is a deceptive book, and I don't mean that in a good way. His operating thesis is interesting and deserves to be explored more fully: that Nietzsche's experience with music and musicians influenced his life and his writings to such a degree that the latter need to be understood and interpreted through that experience. But instead of approaching this thesis in a objective, scholarly fashion, Liébert seems to have a different agenda. In effect, the book is largely an apology for Wagner and an attack on Nietzsche. So, when in the Preface Liébert says: "Perhaps... I have sinned against Nietzsche out of an excess of severity, but, as [Nietzsche] wrote at the end of *The Case of Wagner*, 'this essay is inspired, as you hear, by gratitude,'" we shouldn't miss the irony. Nietzsche is often savage against Wagner. The difference, however, between Nietzsche's attacks on Wagner and Liébert's attacks on Nietzsche is that Nietzsche wasn't pretending to do objective, academic scholarship (he had long previously abandoned that mode), while Liébert does have such pretensions.

The book is as much (or more) biography as it is an examination of Nietzsche's works, and Liébert sifts through Nietzsche's letters and his prose, often using the latter's penchant for hyperbole against him<sup>1</sup>, often stretching evidence beyond its natural conclusions (sometimes into absurdity). In all this, Liébert's contempt for Nietzsche is plain. Thus, Nietzsche comes across as a dilettante (35, 95); a traitor, like Brutus, against Wagner (60, 129, 180); crafty (100); short-winded (115); a casuist, with the "casuist's duplicity" (130, 164); a Puritan (133); "an expert at self-mortification" (139); really a Christian (141); petulant [in a note] (145); habitually duplicitous (201); and "pathologically Romantic" (153), amongst other things.

Liébert includes detailed discussion of Wagner's importance as a musician and composer, which is undeniable, but his defense of Wagner against Nietzsche often consists in one version or another of the genetic fallacy, in which an idea or claim is rejected because of the source of that claim. While not explicitly saying so, Liébert clearly implies or suggests that because of Nietzsche's inferiority as a musician, he was in no position to judge Wagner or his music. Nietzsche was a dilettante, Liébert says, and "That he felt no embarrassment in submitting [a musical composition he'd written] to the composer of *Tristan* indicates that he also lacked the clairvoyance and tact proper

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<sup>1</sup> The most egregious example of this is when Liébert takes Nietzsche at his word in *Ecce Homo* when he says that "it was not just in *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* but throughout his whole work that every time the name Wagner appears, we should not hesitate to substitute his" (112).

to the ‘first psychologist of Europe,’ as he one day will flatter himself to be.” (49) Here Liébert sarcastically turns Nietzsche’s hyperbole against him, and suggests that Nietzsche was such a bad composer that he shouldn’t have dared or presumed to show the great Wagner something that he’d written. The further implication is, again, that such a dilettante has no business criticizing a great artist like Wagner.

Liébert also employs “psychologism,” a version of the genetic fallacy in which the claim or belief of someone is rejected because of the psychological origin of that belief, i.e., how he or she came to believe it. Specifically, Liébert implies that Nietzsche’s views of Wagner spring from hostility and from the Oedipal complex and thus that they ought to be dismissed. For example, since “only hostility was creative” for Nietzsche, Liébert suggests, he broke with and turned on Wagner (perhaps only) in order to fuel his own writing (57). Consequently, after Wagner’s death, Nietzsche was free to express his “rancor” and “hostility” openly (128). The implication, again, is that Nietzsche’s criticisms needn’t be taken seriously, since they spring from such dubious origins.

However, Liébert goes even further than this and employs what we might call “physiologicalism,” for lack of a better term, in which we reject a person’s beliefs or ideas because he isn’t healthy or physically strong enough to believe/accept the contrary view. To be specific, Liébert implies that Nietzsche became too sick to be able to appreciate Wagner’s music, and *that’s* why he objects to it. “[I]llness diminished [Nietzsche’s] attentive capacity,” (91) and he consequently turned an infirmity of his body into an aesthetic principle (70). Indeed, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche himself claims that he has “physiological objections” against Wagnerian opera. But “It is left to the ‘enlightened Wagnerian’ whom Nietzsche addresses in this aphorism,” Liébert says, “to *quite rightly* reply: ‘Then you really are merely not healthy enough for our music?’” (69, emphasis added).

Consequently, because of his ailments, because he can’t physically take Wagner’s music, Nietzsche comes to appreciate lighter music, particularly operettas. “Coming after Wagner, this light-hearted music had [a] restorative effect on Nietzsche” (189). He appreciated this “diverting entertainment,” (194) and his “will to light-heartedness, joined to an increasing sensitivity to external impressions, was at the time so strong that he did not hesitate in finding Offenbach (and even Audran) ‘more inspired’ than Wagner” (190). In fact, Nietzsche found Audran’s *La Mascotte* especially moving and he heard it “several times in Turin *while enjoying ice cream*” (190, emphasis added). One couldn’t possibly think of enjoying ice cream while watching a Wagnerian opera—grand, magisterial, noble as they are. Liébert’s contempt and his dismissive attitude here are clear: Nietzsche, his health ruined, feeble in mind and body, could no longer take Wagner’s profound music, which is real art. The only thing he could really handle anymore was light entertainment, a pleasant

diversion, while perhaps having an ice cream. And *this* is why he rejects and excoriates Wagner.

But Liébert is not content with defending Wagner. His larger aim seems to be to attempt to explain away as much of Nietzsche's brilliance and originality as he can. This is where his thesis—that Nietzsche's works must be understood in relation to his musical experiences—comes most into play, and where it is stretched and abused past the point of believability and good sense.

The argument here consists in first making the link between Nietzsche's music and his writing—that he wrote as if he were composing music; or he tried to make his writing as musical as possible. “[M]usical discourse would be for him...his model for all discourse, even for philosophical discourse” (3). “[Nietzsche's] thinking begins with music. It is the ultimate, sensible, physical ground of his reflections” (9). And: “Nietzsche did define the dominant tonalities of his future philosophical work almost as though music was its clumsy prelude” (52).<sup>2</sup> This is already overstating the case, but Liébert goes further and says that Nietzsche's ideas often derived from his musical experiences. So, for example, “At the piano, the young Nietzsche above all taught himself to interpret, a notion that will occupy a central place in the thought of the philosopher. ‘No, there are no facts, only interpretations.’ This well known formula, which expresses what has been called Nietzsche's perspectivism, is first of all that of a musician” (14-15). Liébert also attempts to explain in the same way Nietzsche's rejection of the ego (16); the Dionysus/Apollo duality (27); the overman (38); and the eternal return (165). Aside from the Apollonian/Dionysian duality, which is inherent in music, Liébert's claims about the links between music and Nietzsche's ideas are quite forced for the most part.

The second step, then, is to remind us continuously how poor a composer and musician Nietzsche was. His “imagination exceeded his capacities for composition” (21). “[B]etween Wagner and Nietzsche, it is Nietzsche who ‘seemed a born dilettante’” (36). Knowing that Nietzsche (foolishly) gave Wagner a copy of one of his own compositions, “We can understand that Wagner must have smiled at the clumsy mistakes of a short-winded improviser” (49). Liébert also reminds us of a well-known incident in which Nietzsche gave one of his compositions to Hans von Bülow<sup>3</sup>, who trashed it mercilessly, saying that if it wasn't a joke or a parody, then it was “the equivalent of a crime in the moral realm,” and “more detestable” than Nietzsche understood (51).

The conclusion we're supposed to draw, then, is that since his writing

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<sup>2</sup> Also: “[M]usic constitutes a constant reference as well as an invisible framework [in Nietzsche's work]” (2). And: Nietzsche transposed “with an increasing mastery his talent as an improviser to the art of words” (22).

<sup>3</sup> Von Bülow (1830 – 1894) was an important musician and conductor. He was a student of Liszt, whose daughter, Cosima, he married. Cosima had an affair with Wagner while married to Von Bülow, then divorced the latter and married Wagner.

and his music are so inextricably linked, if his musical compositions were poor, then his written compositions, and the ideas they contain, must be poor as well. Nietzsche, Liébert says, lacks the capacity for development and organization. This is a kind of “impotence” that is tied to his poor health (97). As in his musical efforts, as a writer, he was “merely an improviser, capable only of brief efforts, despite his ambition to write a classic book, a monument, not just collections of aphorisms and essays” (98). “To tie things together—this was Nietzsche’s constant difficulty, since he no doubt lacked sufficiently strong ‘artistic gifts’ to counterbalance the vigor of his critical faculties” (98). Consequently, “From book to book, none of which from *Human, All Too Human* on were really finished; his aphorisms become merely disjointed fragments, provisional inklings of a thought process that was always underway” (98). Consequently, Nietzsche is a man of *ressentiment*<sup>4</sup> himself, and “the ancestor of a swarming posterity of failed creators who, incapable of works, denounces every completed work as an illusion or imposture” (100).

However, Liébert tends to forget (willfully or not) that the music/writing analogy is just that—an analogy. Nietzsche may indeed have quite consciously attempted to make his prose more “musical,” and some of his ideas may indeed have sprung from his experiences as a musician, but in the end music is one thing, and writing prose and doing philosophy is something really quite different. As a playwright, for example, I may attempt to make my scenes more “visual,” more “painterly,” but these are metaphors, and if I am a poor painter, that has no bearing at all on the quality of my plays.

Second, to say that Nietzsche’s works were unfinished is either an empty or an unjustifiable claim. Because Nietzsche consciously abandoned the form of long, sustained treatises in favor of shorter essays or collections of aphorisms, the work of shaping his books, integrating the different elements to produce the desired effect could potentially go on ad infinitum, just as one might say that poems are never really finished—they can be continuously revised. If *this* is what Liébert means when he says Nietzsche’s works were never really finished, then the claim is empty—it’s almost a tautology. If, on the other hand, what he means is that Nietzsche’s books are just collections of random sayings, and that he failed to create the long, extended argument that he wanted because he was incapable of doing so—and *that’s* why they’re never really finished, then his claim is unjustifiable, if not ridiculous. Given Nietzsche’s aims, and the fact that the form reflects the content of his ideas, works like *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*, for example, are as complete (and revolutionary and brilliant) as most any other works in the history of philosophy.

Third, I’ll mention in passing that far from being the hack that Liébert portrays him to be, Nietzsche was actually a fine musician with a flair for

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<sup>4</sup> Liébert follows Nietzsche in using the French for “resentment.”

improvisation and was a good composer—it's just that he was an amateur, not a professional. And if you were to compare any amateur to a serious professional, and especially to a giant like Wagner, the former would come off poorly in the comparison. Nietzsche had thoughts about becoming a professional, but indeed he lacked the necessary musical gifts to be the kind of musician he wanted to be, and consequently he went into philology and philosophy, for which his gifts were immense. If we were to compare Wagner as a philosopher to Nietzsche, the former would likewise come off badly in comparison—but why should we want to do that in the first place? Wagner wasn't a professional philosopher.

But Liébert's attempts to explain away Nietzsche's originality go further. As much as he can, he tries to attribute Nietzsche's ideas directly to others or to the influence of others, most often to Wagner, and especially the ideas in the *Birth of Tragedy* in the case of Wagner.<sup>5</sup> So it was “through animated conversations with the composer, that the *Birth of Tragedy* took shape” (40). “Without Wagner's example...and without the hold his music had over him, Nietzsche would surely not have attributed primacy to Dionysus” (44). And thus Nietzsche was being original “in that when he borrowed Wagner's ideas, he showed himself to be more Wagnerian than Wagner” (44). Liébert pays this unusual compliment more than once.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Nietzsche's relationship with Wagner “was the central episode in Nietzsche's life” (54), Liébert says; he never really broke with Wagner, but always had a “love-hate” relationship with him (58); and “Nietzsche followed Wagner's advice so well that he became a philosopher” in the first place, thus “freeing up the true music to be found in him: that of language...” (50). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Liébert says, is really the only book that Nietzsche completed after *Human, All Too Human*—but that was really due to Wagner's influence: “Nietzsche compared his book to a ‘symphony’ (the only one, by the way, that he succeeded in orchestrating from end to end). But to a reader endowed with a ‘wicked ear’ it sounds rather like a pastiche of Wagner that has withstood the passage of time less well than the original, no doubt owing to the lack of music” (102).

This last claim is particularly silly and sums up well the main problem with Liébert's book. He is implying that Nietzsche's work is somehow derivative of Wagner—that *Zarathustra* is “a pastiche of Wagner,” but that it's a poor

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<sup>5</sup> Wagner “in many ways was a more perceptive psychologist than [Nietzsche],” says Liébert (56).

<sup>6</sup> Also, the free spirit, the new European man Nietzsche dreams of in his late works is modeled on Wagner's Siegfried (124). And “many pages” of *Human, All Too Human* are infused with the “personal element,” i.e., they're really about Wagner and his wife. Elsewhere, Liébert says that Nietzsche's criticisms of Wagner were prefigured in Eduard Hanslick's work (156, 171), and that Nietzsche borrowed the word “nihilism” from Paul Bourget (158).

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imitation, and it has “withstood the passage of time less well than the original.” But, it’s not clear how Nietzsche’s book *could* be a pastiche of musical pieces—that seems absurd on the face of it, unless Liébert means that the book is derivative of the librettos of Wagner’s operas and the ideas they contain; but in that case the claim would simply be false.

Throughout *Nietzsche and Music* Liébert performs these kinds of gymnastics, trying to imply and argue that Nietzsche’s work is derivative and unoriginal, and that his criticism of Wagner are completely unjustified, the product of sickness if not madness. And there are places where Liébert’s scholarship is shoddy. For example, he mistakenly reports that Nietzsche was born in February of 1844 (13), when Nietzsche’s birthday was in fact October 15<sup>th</sup>.

Worse, Liébert, in trying to convince us of Nietzsche’s mental frailty, reports rumors and suspect claims as facts, and in a manner unworthy of a serious scholar. The most unforgivable example of this is when he passes on the dubious (and by now mythical) claim that Nietzsche suffered and died from syphilis, and—even worse—that he contracted it from a prostitute. “Nietzsche no doubt reproached himself for not having resisted the advances of the ‘flower-maidens’ as calmly as Parsifal” (136), he says. And, reminding us of the occasion on which Nietzsche was accidentally led to a brothel, and, extremely embarrassed at finding himself in that environment, simply played the piano, Liébert says: “There wasn’t always a piano available to allow Nietzsche to turn away from the apparitions ‘of spangles and gauze,’ of ‘flashing skirts promising many things.’ And his health, as is well known, suffered cruelly as a result” (136-137). That is, Nietzsche contracted syphilis from a prostitute and that’s why he had poor health and why he went mad. This is an unsubstantiated rumor at best, purely malicious fiction at worst, and Liébert reports it as fact (note though that, like a good politician might, he doesn’t actually come out and say it).

There is no doubt that music was of great interest to Nietzsche throughout his life; that Wagner had a profound impact on Nietzsche as a young man and continued to be a subject of some of his writings throughout the latter’s mature life; and that (some of) Nietzsche’s attacks on Wagner are personal, unwarranted, and hyperbolic. However, while Nietzsche was concerned with “musical” elements in his writing—the tempo and rhythm of his prose, for example—it is quite a stretch to say that ideas such as the overman and eternal return derived from Nietzsche’s experience of music; and it is wholly unjustifiable to imply that because Nietzsche was a poor musician, that he was likewise a poor writer and philosopher.

In the end, there are much better and more scholarly methods of defending Wagner and criticizing Nietzsche than those Liébert employs in *Nietzsche and Music*. And, what’s more, Nietzsche deserves much better than this hatchet job.

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