

**TO OVERCOME ONE'S SELF:
NIETZSCHE, BIZET AND WAGNER**

George H. Leiner

1872

... it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally justified ... (GT 5)

1882

As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be *able* to turn ourselves into such phenomenon. (FW 107)

1888

Life without music is simply an error, a hardship, an exile. (Brief an Heinrich Köselitz, 15.Jan.88; see also Br. an Brandes, 27.May.88)

In 1882 Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in the *Fröhliche Wissenschaft* that existence remains bearable as an aesthetic phenomenon (FW 107). By this point he was no longer seeking a 'justification' of life as he had been some 14 years earlier when he had penned the *Geburt der Tragödie*. Such an attempt seemed from a later vantage point 'the typical creed of the romantic of 1830, masked by the pessimism of 1850' (1886, GT Attempt at Self-Criticism 7). The viewpoint that life could only be borne as a creative project adopted in the *Fröhliche Wissenschaft* was taken up within the context of discovering Bizet's music, and in particular the opera *Carmen*.

Music had always played a pivotal role in Nietzsche's life. It made possible a non-discursive, direct experience of life far different from the highly analytical, scholarly reflections of professional academic scholarship of late 19th century Europe. Moreover, it was an element of life that Nietzsche took to be essential to the task of philosophy: '... one becomes more of a philosopher the more one becomes a musician' (W 1). Music allowed him, through his own compositional efforts beginning as early as 1856 and continuing until 1887, yet another avenue through which he could express his own growing insight.¹ It brought him into contact with some of the most important cultural figures of the Europe of his day. And, when all else

failed to give him health, 'in the most spiritual as well as the most sensuous sense' (J 255) it was music which could do so. In the last year of his lucidity, music had assumed an ever greater role in Nietzsche's life. As he confided to Heinrich Köselitz (Peter Gast) in a letter early in that year, 'Life without music is simply an error, a hardship, an exile' (Brief an Heinrich Köselitz, 15.Jan.88).

I would suggest that we may find it particularly enriching to remain within the context of music as we seek to understand Nietzsche's concept of self-overcoming. I believe this approach makes possible a more direct and vivid experience of self-overcoming in its fullest existential dimensions. In what follows I will direct the reader's attention to the texts, both written and musical, which I find helpful in gaining such an understanding. The vantage point for the examination of these texts will be that of what is meant by 'giving style' to one's character (FW 290), with this basic concept being analysed in terms of three elements: *amor fati*, the willingness to take risks in life, and finally the careful measure and rhythm which must be incorporated into the style of one's life.

The published texts are, of course, the most significant source for our engagement with Nietzsche's thought. However, we may also fruitfully draw upon his correspondence with friends to get a sense of the full dimension of music in his life. Furthermore, we will find that some musical texts form such significant elements of the context of Nietzsche's thought, that they virtually become Nietzschean texts. In this class are found Bizet's *Carmen* and Wagner's works, in particular *Siegfried*, *Parsifal* and *Tristan und Isolde*. His affinity for *Carmen* gives us a vivid image of the life he would have us lead as preparatory humans, as those who have the potential to overcome those things within themselves that can either destroy them, or make them stronger. His reasons for rejecting Wagnerian music provide further dimensions, admittedly negative ones, to Nietzsche's grasp of the creatively enriched human life.²

Nietzsche discovered *Carmen* contemporaneously with this work on the *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*. He first experienced the opera 27.Nov.81, reporting this event to his friend and confidant Heinrich Köselitz in a postcard of the following day. He was ecstatic. Here Nietzsche finds a contemporary musical form which had not been 'disoriented' by Wagnerianism. He discovers a subtlety in the articulation of passion which avoids the

affectation present in Wagner's portrayals of the human condition. And finally, and perhaps most significantly, he senses that Bizet's *Carmen* may provide him with a tonic - a tonic for his entire being:

Again made the acquaintance of something good, an opera by François [sic] Bizet (who is that?): *Carmén* [sic] Today somewhat sick, because of bad weather, not because of the music: maybe I would have been even sicker if I had not heard it. Good things are a medicine for me! (ibid.).

This was just the beginning of his long preoccupation with Bizet's work. He wrote frequently to Köselitz and Carl Fuchs, among others, of the inspiration and rehabilitation *Carmen* provided for him.³ What are we to make of this long standing relationship? Can it help, as I have suggested, to shed light on Nietzsche's concept of self-overcoming?; I believe so.

In the music and the figure of the heroine he finds what he has come to call in his publication of 1882 a 'gay science.' Nietzsche finds a music which has resulted from self-overcoming (of the spirit of Wagner's brand of pessimistic romanticism). He discovers a music which encourages others to dance to such a rhythm. Fundamentally, the opera presents an exemplification of this life - *Carmen* herself. But what does it mean to embrace life as a 'gay science'? To discern this, we will need to turn to the *FW* itself.

To live life as a 'gay science' means one is able to overcome the worst of one's times, and the worst of one's own inclinations. In Nietzsche's terms it means '[t]o "give style" to one's character - a great and rare art!' (*FW* 290). To do this means that one has an 'artistic plan.' It means that one displays a 'single taste.' It requires discipline and restraint, and obedience to creative law chosen by oneself.

If we are to inquire as to the fundamental elements of this project, we will find the three enumerated at the outset: *amor fati*, risk taking, and careful measure. To love one's fate; this is *amor fati* (*FW* 276). To embrace such a perspective is to say yes to the conditions within which one must be creatively engaged. It is to embrace the vital possibilities presented by the particulars of one's own human existence. It demands a commitment of one's self to

celebrating the life shaped according to one's own creative molding of the circumstances of one's life.

Such a life does, of course, require the running of risks. Nietzsche recognizes that the 'preparatory courageous human beings' (*FW* 283) will come from the every-day of our civilization. They must seek to 'overcome' the commonplace predispositions which will try to dissuade them from creative experimentation with the conditions of their lives. Such humans will find themselves endangered not only by their counterparts more inclined to be 'stolid metronomes' (*FW* 76), but endangered as well as by their own somewhat unpredictable selves: '*live dangerously!* Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius!' (*FW* 283).

The life of self-overcoming is not, however, an unrestrained eruption of libidinal energy. It is not a '*laissez aller*,' a 'letting go,' an unbridled license (*J* 188). Rather, the risks undertaken must be of one's own careful measure. There must be a rhythm, a rhyme, a meter to the lives of those who would overcome themselves. As a philosopher, as a preparatory human being, one could not wish for anything better than 'to be a good dancer' (*FW* 381). Such a thing is the highest piety, a 'service of God' (*FW* 381). Such a disciplined dance is a 'kind of tyranny and unreason' against nature (*J* 188). But, this constraint brings true 'freedom, subtlety, boldness, dance, and masterly sureness' (*J* 188).

But where is one to find exemplifications of such virtues? Within Nietzsche's own works, in the tragedy that is about to begin - in Zarathustra (*FW* 342). But also, in the music which he has just encountered in November of '81, in the Mediterranean music of Bizet. And who is this 'François' Bizet? He is the one who has created 'a new beauty and seduction - who discovered a piece of *the south of music*' (*FW* 254). In this music is found a certain naivete, a lack of pretentiousness, a use of native rhythms and dance forms, a 'need and talent for melody' (Br. an Carl Fuchs, Mitte Apr.86). Nietzsche finds Bizet a composer who can carry the 'profound, more powerful, perhaps more evil ... supra-German music 'to the Mediterranean' (*J* 255), to provide the musical rhythm for the 'Provençal concept of *gaya scienza*' (*EH* III.5 (*FW*)). Such a talent makes it possible for us to be the 'grave and serious human beings - really more weights than human beings - ' that we are, while enabling all the

‘exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful art’ that marks self-overcoming (FW 107).

In this music, Nietzsche finds the harmonies to accompany his recovery from Wagnerianism: ‘ - You want a word for it? - If I were a moralist, who knows what I might call it? Perhaps self-overcoming’ (W V). It is *Carmen* and its composer who will accompany and aid Nietzsche in this process: ‘Bizet makes me fertile. Whatever is good makes me fertile’ (W 1).

In *Der Fall Wagner* (1888) Nietzsche brings together his thoughts against Wagnerianism within the context of his immersion in Bizet’s music, and especially *Carmen*. It was this piece out of all Bizet’s music that Nietzsche thought was the surest, the most mature. He thought highly of *L’Arlésienne* and the symphony *Roma*, encouraging performances by conductors with whom he had some acquaintance, but found only the first act of the opera *The Pearl Fishers* to be worthy. The remainder he found to be uneven, betraying an insufficiently integrated influence of Gounod on the one hand, and Wagner on the other (Klein, 220; Br. an Heinrich Köselitz, 20.Dez.87).

Turning his attention to Wagner, it was the latter’s inability to ‘give style’ to his music, and through this his own character, that Nietzsche found intolerable. Instead of such a style, which would give testimony to self-overcoming, Wagner substituted a shoddy ‘great style,’ a dramatic style (W 1, 6-8, 10). In Nietzsche’s eyes, Wagner’s music certainly did not embrace the love of one’s human fate, nor was it willing to take fundamental existential risks, nor finally did it display the requisite aesthetic discipline. Thus, on all three counts it comes up short.

In Bizet’s work Nietzsche finds *amor fati*, made manifest in the playfulness and embodied, erotic nature of *Carmen*, and Bizet’s mature psychological insight and intelligent grasp of the complexities of human interdynamics. When examining Wagner’s work Nietzsche spots something quite different: brutality, artificiality, and a cynical innocence (W 1,5). Wagner is brutal Nietzsche alleges; indeed he tyrannizes his listeners (W 8). The orchestra swells, the scoring thickens, definitive melodies disappear in favor of ‘infinite melody’ (W 1,6). The result, Nietzsche finds, is that Wagner’s audiences are overpowered. Any possible space for

the enticement of subtle insight has vanished: 'his pathos topples every taste, every resistance... . The way Wagner's pathos holds its breath, refuses to let go an extreme feeling, achieves a terrifying *duration* of states when even a moment threatens to strangle us - ' (*W* 8).

Wagner fails on the grounds of the artificiality of his psychology. It remains unsubtle and heavy handed ' ... [Wagner] was not enough of a psychologist for drama' (*W* 9). In *Siegfried* the two dimensionality of characterization is readily apparent. In the final scene Siegfried's outbursts are the clumsiest of unself-reflective outbursts, more blustering and inept buffoonery than exhilarating eroticism. Siegfried demands to cool his burning passion in Brünnhilde's cool pool; he shakes the *Walküre*, commanding her to 'Awaken, for me be a woman.' Brünnhilde's figure is an awkward caricature of the Apollonian, betraying the psychological dualism of modernity, the traces of which Nietzsche abandoned soon after the *Geburt der Tragödie*. In the face of Siegfried's entreaties she wails, 'My senses swoon, my reason reels! Must my wisdom wither?'

In a final strike against Wagner, seasoned understanding of the complexity of the human situation is replaced by a cynical innocence. To support this contention, Nietzsche points to the lie of selfless love perpetrated in Wagner's work (*W* 2). In *Tristan* the title figures deliriously abandon the subjectivity of human embodied love in favor of a Schopenhaueresque dissolution of individuality in the *Liebestod* scenes. Furthering the triumph of *Jenseits*, Nietzsche focuses on the theme of transcendental redemption so prevalent in Wagner's work. (*W* 2,3). In *Parsifal*, perhaps the most striking example, Kundry, Amfortas and the entire brotherhood of the Knights of the Grail are redeemed by a virginal youth, insensitive to the call of eros.

The second element of *amor fati* that I have been stressing is the embracing of risks. When Nietzsche examines the Wagnerian *corpus*, he concludes that Wagner, instead of demonstrating a willingness to take risks with life, indeed exemplifies and promotes romantic decadence. In this Nietzsche sees the collapse back into the old gods, into the denigration and renunciation of this life and its existential conditions. Once again, the redemptive flight out of this world into the next is cited by Nietzsche as evidence of this, as he finds examples in

Tannhäuser, Der Fliegende Holländer, Die Meistersinger, and, of course, *Parsifal*. Calling the premier representative of a reformed *Sturm und Drang* to his aid, Nietzsche poses the question:

What Goethe might have thought of Wagner? - Goethe once asked himself what danger threatened all romantics: the fatality of romanticism. His answer was: 'Suffocating of the rumination of moral and religious absurdities.' In brief: *Parsifal*. (W 3).

Through these achievements, Nietzsche argues that Wagner, as the '*artist of decadence ... has made music sick* - ' (W 5). Rather than daring to take the risks to overcome the daunting hazards of life he promotes a swooning into unconsciousness: 'Wagner increases exhaustion ...' (W 5).

Nietzsche has thus concluded that Wagner betrays true style by abandoning our human fate and retreating to the refuge of the great metaphysical beyond. His final charge is that of the abandonment of necessary aesthetic structure. Instead of the careful measure of discipline and restraint Nietzsche alleges that Wagner indulges himself in lawlessness (W 8). In Wagner's work Nietzsche discovers a pervasive abandonment of the rigour of compositional structure, metric and tonal centrality.⁴ In their place Nietzsche accuses Wagner of substituting 'sound, movement, colour, in brief the sensuousness of music... . what he wants is effect, nothing but effect' (W 8). The result, Nietzsche argues, is to valorize passion without structure or restraint: 'Let us reach an understanding about passion. Nothing is cheaper than passion. One can dispense with all the virtues of counterpoint ...' (W 6). After the counterpoint Wagner has abandoned melody. Nietzsche writes ironically ' - And *melody*! Slander, my friends, let us slander, if we are at all serious about our ideal [i.e., the Wagnerian ideal], let us slander melody!' (W 6).⁵

In direct contrast to Wagner's false bravado of the dramatic style, Nietzsche finds in Bizet's music and in the characters of his opera *Carmen* a true exemplification of the ability to overcome oneself, to 'give style' to one's character. The characters, originally created by Mérimée and lent further vitality by Bizet, embrace the full dimension of eros. Carmen, Don

José, and Escamillo know that in its burning creativity eros consumes as well as begets; they embrace *amor fati*:

This work [*Carmen*], too, redeems; Wagner is not the only 'redeemer.'
With this work one takes leave of the *damp* north, of all the steam of
the Wagnerian ideal... . Another sensuality, another sensibility speaks
here, another cheerfulness. This music is cheerful, but not in a French
or German way. Its cheerfulness is African; fate hangs over it; its
happiness is brief, sudden, without pardon. (*W* 2)

Bizet has chosen to make the culture of the bullfight a central metaphor in his opera. This world was not absent from Mérimée's novel, but it is given a heightened importance by the composer. Escamillo, the toreador, is filled with bravado, and his famous song does, at times, descend close to self-parody. However, he is still aware of the fate that he courts and is willing to embrace:

Do not forget that when you draw your sword
Two dark eyes look down
And love is your reward
(Act II, Scene 2)

There are, quite obviously, more than one set of dark eyes looking down. *Toro* is there on the sand with Escamillo and his *muleta* and sword; Carmen holds the dress cape, ready to be retrieved should the toreador be victorious; and overlooking all are the eyes of fate.

Carmen herself both sings of, and dances with, her fate. When the young men ask her when they can expect her love she rejoins:

When will *you* have my love? Good Lord! How can I tell ...
Perhaps not at all, tomorrow maybe!
(Prelude to 'L'amour est un oiseau rebelle,' Act 1, Scene 5)

As she deals the cards, Carmen sees her own death, and that of Don José, but she will not evade it:

You can never escape their unrelenting answer,
However hard you try!
You only waste your time, because the cards are honest
And will not tell a lie!
(Act III, Scene 2)

And, in the final scene with Don José outside the bullring:

They came just now to warn me
That you were not far off, that you were sure to stay;
And they told me my life itself might be in danger;
But I am brave! And I shan't run away!

[Don José implores her to come with him]

No, for I know it is time now,
And I know I'm going to die;
But if I live or if you kill me,
I'll not give in to you, not I.

[Carmen, in response to Don José's direct question, declares her love for Escamillo]

I love him,
I love him, and in the face of death
I repeat again that I love him.
(Act IV, Scene 2)

Not only does Carmen sing of her consonance with fate, but this is evident in her dance as well. In her dances, she plays, in full and mature knowledge of the power of her embodied speech. She celebrates her sense of self, draws others to her as both companions and enemies, and in doing so declares to all the life which she will live. Julia Migenes' performance in the Maazel/Ledoux/Rosi film production is a particularly fine exemplification of this aspect of Bizet's work. I would call the reader's attention to the artistry of the movement of Migenes' Carmen in the dances with which she accompanies 'L'amour est un oiseau rebelle' (Act I, Scene 5), 'Tra la la la' (Act I, Scene 9), 'Près des remparts de Séville' (Act I, Scene 10), and her dance for Don José (Act II, Scene 5).

Clearly, in her embrace of fate, Carmen is willing to take risks for the sake of creative self-overcoming. She is quite willing to live outside of the conventional law if this is contrary to

her creation of self. When, in Act II, Scene 5, Don José is called back to the barracks by the bugles, Carmen is astounded at his unwillingness to defy convention for the sake of their love.

I thought, Heaven forgive me,
I was almost in love!
Ta ra ta ta, my God, there go the bugles!
He's off, he's taken fright!
Off you fly, you canary! ...

No! You are not in love! No! No! If it were true,
Out there, with me, you'd follow too! ...

Into the hills where none would find you,
Into the hills we both would ride,
We both would ride - were you in love!
Up there you need answer to no-one;
No orders there, no Captain you need to obey,
Up there no retreat will be sounded,
Roughly reminding lovers to be on their way!

Sky up above, and open spaces,
For one's home all the world, and for law each goes his way!
Best of all, like wine to the senses,
The life that's free! The life that's free!

Bizet's own choice to bring *Carmen* to the stage of the *opéra-comique* displays in itself an embrace of the unorthodox. Martin Cooper points out that Bizet's willingness to go outside of convention lies not so much with the frank treatment of sexual material, but by rather his choice to present a female who consciously and resolutely breaks the traditional sexual mores; she was the first in the type of role exemplified by Don Giovanni (Cooper 15).

The bulk of my commentary on Bizet's *Carmen* has been designed to emphasize the heroine's personification of a Nietzschean preparatory human being, one filled with the confident self-overflowing vitality of life. But where is the restraint which I indicated was a necessary component of 'giving style' to one's character? One might well ask whether Carmen is not simply indiscriminate, even promiscuous, with her love. I would argue to the contrary. Carmen is not merely manipulating Don José. She found herself at the beginning of love with him, as she tells her friends in their quintet 'I'm in love, insanelly in love' (Act II, Scene 4). This does not seem to be simply jest, as she is willing to modify her relationship with her

smuggler friends for the sake of pursuing her relationship with Don José. Furthermore, Don José's past life would suggest an unconventional and independent character who might well have held some innate appeal to Carmen. Although in most productions of the opera these lines are omitted, Don José tells Zuniga that he left the path of the priesthood early on, and that he is in exile from Navarre for almost beating a man to death (Act I, Scene 3).

Nonetheless, Don José's early promise does not bear fruit. Carmen finds that he is not committed to her unconditionally, but is still bound by his loyalty to the bourgeois conventions of military duty (Act II, Scene 5). This is not adequate for Carmen. She will only commit on equal, if not absolute, terms; Don José is not prepared for such rarified heights.

Carmen herself is resolute, and not just in her relationship to her lovers, as she declares:

I pay my debts ... that's gipsy law ...
I pay my debts ... I pay my debts ...
(Act III, Scene 5)

Even when faced with the possibility of saving her own life by disingenuously reaffirming love to Don José she replies:

What you ask can never happen!
Carmen never yet has lied!
Her mind is made up completely,
For her and you ... it's the end.
(Act IV, Scene 2)

Not only does Carmen show her discipline and resolution in her spoken words, but they are there in her dance as well. In this she shows her demand for absolute freedom is not licentious license, not a *laissez aller*, but the freedom to define her own center of gravity. This grace of power and control is found in the rhythm of her hips, her fingers, her castanets. She demands the prerogative to establish the meter of her life, whether a habanera, a seguidilla, or the time and place of her own death.

Throughout Bizet's music itself we find the melody which Nietzsche prized so highly. Definitive melodies abound, melodies which sharply and decisively define the thematic

outlines of the drama, from the syncopated habanera of Carmen to the hymn-like duet of Micaela and Don José. Furthermore, these are drawn liberally from the vitality of indigenous melody and dance.

This would seem to complete a case for the Nietzschean 'style' of Bizet's creation, *Carmen*, and to illuminate the idea of self-overcoming. Nietzsche saw on the stage, tens of times by his own account, this exemplar of a preparatory human being. When one attempts to grasp what Nietzsche is suggesting to us as a way to build our characters, we can find vitality for that image by bringing to our mind Carmen, a single acacia held lightly between her lips. When we want to find an image to warn us away from the opposite extreme, we can bring to mind loutish Siegfried, stomping about Brünnhilde, braying to all who will listen of his unbridled passion. Which would Nietzsche recommend?. The answer is clear.⁶

NOTES

1. For an account of Nietzsche's work as a composer, see Frederick Love's *Young Nietzsche and the Wagnerian Experience*, Curt Paul Janz's 'Die Kompositionen Friedrich Nietzsches,' and Andres Briner's 'Nietzsche als Musiker.'
2. The views I present here are not meant as a definitive musicological judgment on Nietzsche's conclusions as to the broad value of Wagner's or Bizet's music. Rather, I am primarily interested in investigating how Nietzsche's commentary on their music may open up for us new ways of experiencing his urging that we overcome ourselves.
3. Perhaps the sole negative observations with respect to the opera came in a letter to Fuchs just a week before Nietzsche's collapse in Turin, and these are completely inconsistent with the views he repeatedly expressed over the previous 7 years. For an overview of the controversy surrounding this letter of 27.Dez.88, see Jerzy Galecki's 'Nietzsche und Bizets Carmen,' and John W. Klein's 'Nietzsche's attitude to Bizet.'
4. In making this accusation Nietzsche fails, quite obviously, to acknowledge the revolutionary transformations in the musical vocabulary ushered in by Wagner, transformations to which so much of 20th century music owes such an enormous debt.
5. In order to appreciate the many dimensions of Nietzsche's critique of Wagner, it would be advantageous at this point to enter into the opera hall and experience Wagner first hand. Unfortunately, the opportunities for this are not frequently available. As an imperfect but nonetheless worthy substitute, I would recommend a viewing of Act III, Scene III of *Siegfried*. A fine performance is to be found in the Boulez/Chéreau production (See Bibliography).
6. It is clear that only if the reader has had direct experience with Bizet's *Carmen* can he or she hope to judge Nietzsche's critique. Once again, the insertion of at least a segment of a live performance at this juncture would be ideal. This not being possible, a viewing of the video recording of the Maazel/Ledoux/Rosi film production would be recommended (see Bibliography). In particular, I would advise viewing the Prelude, 'L'amour est un oiseau rebelle' (Act I, Scene 5), 'Tra la la la' (Act I, Scene 9), 'Près des remparts de Séville' (Act I, Scene 10), 'Je vais danser en votre honneur' (Act II, Scene 5), and the Finale (Act III, Scene 2).

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