

## Why did Nietzsche abandon Wagner for *Carmen*?

Marcin Fabjański, Ph.D.

Common philosophers cultivate their field with the thought. Friedrich Nietzsche did it with his body. Common philosophers before him, except perhaps ancient Greeks and Schopenhauer, listen to music as an amusement. Nietzsche – to develop an experience in his body and mind: something thrilling, leaving aside anything that is trivial and at the end transforming. For him, listening was not a trifle. He wrote in *Wagner Case*:

*Yesterday – would you believe it? – I heard Bizet's masterpiece for the twentieth time. Once more I attended with the same gentle reverence; once again I did not run away. This triumph over The Case Of Wagner: A Musician's Problem 19 my impatience surprises me. How such a work completes one! Through it one almost becomes a "masterpiece" oneself. – And, as a matter of fact, each time I heard Carmen it seemed to me that I was more of a philosopher, a better philosopher than at other times: I became so forbearing, so happy, so Indian, so settled...  
[trans. Anthony M. Ludovici]*

### Gravity of thought

Being a philosopher – according to that description – is for Nietzsche a series of acts of consciousness, against impulses such as an escape from opera. Not making philosophical notes or a job at a university. Being a philosopher is gradable. Philosophy is constant care about the state of the consciousness. When I'm cleaning my teeth in the morning I can be a philosopher or not. It depends how I feel reality. Do I get entangled in one of the ready-made but emotionally flat stories which religion, custom and especially advertisements suggest? And when I disentangle myself from it, do I feel my being biological directly – my existence and acts of will which work through me?

But how do I disentangle myself?

That is why we have *Carmen*.

Thanks to it Nietzsche disentangled himself from Richard Wagner. I can see him listen to Bizet's opera and tremble, to break the phantom fetters of Wagnerian stories with a series of violent movements. He gets out of the cobweb of the Christian story of salvation, as Wagner fell into his disfavour because he became Christian. Then he changes, becomes free from all nature, like a superman who has just hatched from a common nonentity.

Now he is totally relaxed, as if he had been doing yoga all day. His ligaments are flexible, muscles ready to work, his body supple and strong. He does not complain (as he used to) that Wagner's notes choke his lungs, stomach, heart, intestines and clog up his throat with unpleasant tightness. He writes:

*My greatest experience was recovery. Wagner is completely numbered among my diseases.*

And about *Carmen*:

*Bizet's music seems to me perfect. It comes forward lightly, gracefully, stylishly. It is lovable, it does not sweat. [...] And once more: I become a better man when Bizet speaks to me. Also a better musician, a better listener. Is it in any way possible to listen better? – I even burrow behind this music with my ears. I hear its very cause. I seem to assist at its birth. I tremble before the dangers which this daring music runs, I am enraptured over those happy accidents for which even Bizet himself may not be responsible. – And, strange to say, at bottom I do not give it a thought, or am not aware how much thought I really do give it. For quite other ideas are running through my head the while... Has any one ever observed that music emancipates the spirit? gives wings to thought? and that the more one becomes a musician the more one is also a philosopher?*

Music makes your soul free. Can you believe it?

What if thought had bodies? Some would walk drowsily on the ground like sleepy flies in autumn, others would fly to the sky, flapping their wings of music. The sleepy ones, and that is really bad, would not go where they would like to, but would obediently trudge where God whistles them up. Not even God, but priests and preachers who made God. And with Him morality of slaves, boredom, betrayal of life.

Nietzsche abandoned Wagner because the rhythm of the latter's music made thought in the body give in to an unpleasant kind of gravity. Choking gravity. He abandoned Wagner with *Carmen*, because with that opera thoughts are lighter.

*Here another kind of sensuality, another kind of sensitiveness and another kind of cheerfulness make their appeal. This music is gay, but not in a French or German*

*way. Its gaiety is African; fate hangs over it, its happiness is short, sudden, without reprieve.*

### **Metaphysics derived from experiences**

Only when trite stories which our decadent tradition (and with it Wagner's music) cease, we can start to make philosophy. At that moment Christian pity, directed against life, will fall asleep and life itself will wake up, with all its dark but exciting sides. When we tear our attention out of a moralizing story, we will be able to offer it to our own experiences. A great return to ourselves will occur, or rather our escape from ourselves will end. Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* described it as follows:

*You flee to your neighbor from yourselves, and would rather make a virtue thereof: but I fathom your "unselfishness." [...] You cannot endure it with yourselves, and do not love yourselves sufficiently: so you seek to mislead your neighbor into love, and would rather gild yourselves with his error.*

I know, you are afraid of death. I know, frailty of existence, your weakness and finiteness terrify you. But do not make your self and your seemingly stable world from pieces of yourself, reflected in brains of other people – advises Nietzsche in all his mature works. See where you are. You exist as an animal and as an exceeding of an animal. And when you see that, you will not have to prove anything. Or compulsively seek the attention of others – “Nächsten zum Liebe verführen” (“... seek to mislead your neighbor into love”).

You will stop fastening yourself to heavy stories of Wagnerian type hoping that they will confirm your existence. You will not be afraid of their ending. Waiting in fear for next ones. Instead, you will lightly fly with Bizet. You will derive your existence from senses. Your body and thought will not be separate any more. You will experience the process of life concentrated at one moment, experience, feeling, perception, what Nietzsche called “Empfindung”.

In the end you will thrive – as a philosopher and an animal. You will no longer look at yourself through the glasses of a thought up ego, which filter the subtleties of existence and let you see only the strongest emotions: love, hate, compassion. Now they will show you all those micro-thrills of your soul which we cannot even name. For what an ordinary person, not a philosopher, sees is only a small fragment of reality.

Do you want to see for yourself? – asks Nietzsche. Of course you do. Therefore, perform such a mental experiment: imagine that your sense organs enlarge things enormously. Or that they reduce objects to the size of a single cell. How would you think about the world then? How do creatures for which one cell is like a solar system think about this world?

Listen to *Carmen* and abandon the ordinary, hackneyed experiencing in which the world is a collection of separate objects. Dissolve your consciousness in the process of life. And remember – in order to gain something, first you must leave something.

**Dr Marcin Fabjański** studied Western Philosophy in Poznań, Poland and York, UK. He spent almost two years in Asia – India, China, Nepal, Thailand and Burma – where he intensely meditated and went deep into Eastern Philosophy. He has written the first Polish guide of philosophical practice *Stoicyzm uliczny* and a book in which he proposes his own method of practicing philosophy *Zaufaj życiu. Nie zakochuj się w przelatującym wróblu*. He has created a project concerning regaining happiness in everyday life – [www.selfoff.com](http://www.selfoff.com)