The Influence and Application of Eastern Philosophy in the Western Musical Tradition

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The fundamental area that my research grant explores is the connection between the disciplines of music and philosophy. Music is an art form that gives rise to intriguing philosophical puzzles, many of which have yet to be completely figured out. For instance, why do people purposefully seek out and experience sad music? Most people do not purposefully seek out sad experiences in their everyday lives, yet see nothing strange about listening to a piece of music that will bring them to tears. Other philosophical questions about music are more ontological or metaphysical in nature. For example, what constitutes an actual musical work? Initially we might think that a piece of music is identical with an individual performance, but this is puzzling because subsequent performances may be radically different. The same could be said of the sound waves generated by a performance. Some may argue that the piece of music itself is the score, but this also seems counter-intuitive because the score itself is incapable of producing sound on its own. Other more psychological questions attempt to understand where the emotion in music comes from. We talk about particular pieces being 'triumphant' or 'sad,' which is strange given that nothing in the music itself is actually sentient and capable of possessing emotions. Do emotions come to us somehow through the music directly from the mind of the composer? Or if emotions are entirely overlaid onto the music by listeners, then what makes us associate certain emotions with certain chords, instruments, melodies, etc., and can a listener feel the 'wrong' emotions for a given section or piece of music?

First, this paper will outline the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, then show how he influenced Richard Wagner and some other late romantic composers. I will then discuss my own

piece of music, the problems with it and its successes, and how the previously discussed philosophy integrates with all of it. My research focuses specifically on the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, perhaps the first and most influential philosopher to ever devote significant time to the discussion of music. Most of the following three paragraphs are a synopsis of the information present in chapter nine of The Tristan Chord by Bryan Magee.

Schopenhauer's basic philosophy, as articulated in his magnum opus The World as Will and Representation, was based primarily on the preceding work of Immanuel Kant. Kant thought that our minds create a mental representation of the world around us, based on input from our five senses. These facets of reality which we can directly perceive and therefore comprehend Kant categorized into the 'phenomenal' world. Anything we have a representation of, however, does also exist in the real world as a 'thing in itself,' most likely with properties we cannot detect, in a completely unknowable 'noumenal' realm outside of our sense data. It seems likely that many objects, even normal everyday ones, like pencils or tables, possess qualities that we are incapable of detecting.

Schopenhauer combined this with another one of Kant's ideas - that the experience of time and space is only possible in the phenomenal world. Schopenhauer reasoned that everything in the noumenal must actually be one - because without the experience of time and space it is impossible for anything to exist separately or differently from anything else, and these experiences are, by definition, only possible in the phenomenal world knowable to our minds. Kant believed that the phenomenal and noumenal were causally linked, but Schopenhauer argued this wasn't possible because causality also could not exist outside of time and space. Thus, Schopenhauer proposed a different view, that the phenomenal and noumenal are essentially two different aspects or faces of the same fundamental reality. For Schopenhauer, the noumenal came

to mean the inner most essence, or core of being, that the phenomenal was just an outward expression and representation of.

Schopenhauer viewed the world as a generally cruel place. He regarded people as being motivated primarily by selfish reasons. He viewed the natural world as no better, as animals and plants in nature are constantly fighting a battle for survival at the cost of other living and often sentient organisms. At some point, Schopenhauer discovered that his philosophy contained many aspects of certain Eastern religions, like Buddhism and Hinduism, certain branches of which teach doctrines of interconnectedness and oneness, respectively. He also found that Buddhism, especially, shared his philosophical pessimism about the world. The Buddhist notion of dukkha, typically translated simply as 'suffering,' claims that existence in the world is inherently unsatisfactory. Most religions, such as Christianity, believe that whatever exists at the core of the world as we know it (God, eternal souls, Brahman, etc) is fundamentally a positive, good, force. Schopenhauer, however, because he had reasoned that the phenomenal and noumenal were two different aspects of the same fundamental reality, applied the characteristics he could see in the phenomenal world to describe the noumenal as well. Since he saw the world as containing endless striving and fundamentally unfulfillable desire, Schopenhauer reasoned that the noumenal must also possess these characteristics, and reluctantly coined the term 'Will' to describe it as a powerful force of blind and unending desire at the core our existence.

Schopenhauer was greatly admired, even revered, by the late romantic composer Richard Wagner. Wagner was unique in that he was perhaps the only highly regarded composer in the Western Art Music tradition who was also interested and immersed in philosophy. Although he was already an established composer when he was exposed to Schopenhauer's work, reading <u>The</u>

World as Will and Representation led Wagner to challenge and change his worldview and further develop his music.

Schopenhauer viewed music as the one art form that was not representational in nature. A painting of a flower is a representation of the visual experience of a flower, which itself is part of a phenomenal representation of the noumenal flower in itself. Music, however, was unique to Schopenhauer because it was, like the entire phenomenal world, another expression of the Will itself, 'the inner being, the in-itself, of the world' (Macgee The Tristan Chord 171). For both Schopenhauer and Wagner, this fact explained music's profound expressive power, which they believed to be above that of the other arts.

Wagner took the idea of the endless wanting and striving of the Will and tailored his music specifically to exploit this aspect of reality. He used tonality, the system of hierarchical pitch organization used in Western Art Music from around 1700 to 1910, to stimulate desire within listeners, based off of Schopenhauer's description of the suspension, a musical device in which a 'suspended' note sounds as if it should resolve downwards into a chord tone. Specifically, Wagner conceived of and composed an entire opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, around the idea of making the listener always dissatisfied and desiring of a harmonic resolution. In doing this, he advanced the musical language of his day, and in the minds of many modern music theorists, stretched tonality so far that subsequent composers, such as Schoenberg, were more or less forced to abandon it in order to write music that sounded harmonically fresh and original.

This is the backdrop against which my research began. The first issue I would like to address is Schopenhauer's original philosophy verses Wagner's interpretation. Schopenhauer believed that our natural, base state as humans, was one of desire, since our phenomenal experience inherits this quality from the noumenal out of which it arises. Although Schopenhauer

did not deny that fulfilling desires temporarily satiates them, he believed that by necessity we will always return to a state of willing and desire. This led him to praise asceticism as a lifestyle and the meditative practices of Eastern religions, which focus on, from the perspective of Schopenhauer's framework, directly experiencing the noumenal in a sustained way that music (or sexual intercourse, another brief window into the Will, according to Schopenhauer) cannot provide.

Wagner, although he accepted essentially all of Schopenhauer's philosophy, added some interpretation of his own. Wagner's music, for example, although it does string the listener along for long periods without resolution, does always eventually resolve in the end, effectively satisfying the listener's musical desires. Wagner's music is obviously indebted to the traditions of Western Art Music, which typically call for resolution at the end of a piece, despite the fact that this normal resolution is somewhat at odds with Schopenhauer's philosophy of insatiable desire.

Another, more specific divergence between Wagner and Schopenhauer occurs at the end of *Tristan und Isolde*, when the main characters, unable to be united in love while living, are united in death. This moment matches the harmonic resolution of the music, conveying that the character's lustful and worldly desires are in fact satisfied through death, when they literally become one with each other in the noumenal. There are several aspects of this which diverge from Schopenhauer's original philosophy. First, Tristan and Isolde are no more together in the noumenal after death than they were together in the noumenal before death. Since phenomenal reality is an expression of the noumenal, any portion of the characters that may be joined after death would also already be noumenally one before death. This is related to the second problem, an obvious one, which is that Schopenhauer (and as far as I know Wagner as well) did not

believe that individual consciousness persisted after death - so even if Tristan and Isolde did become one through death, their experience of oneness would be on the same level that one part of a table experiences it is the same with another part of a table, that is, non-existent.

Lastly, Schopenhauer specifically rejected suicide and death as a means to escape the will (Magee Philosophy of Schopenhauer 222). Since everything phenomenal is a manifestation of the will, the death of one individual is essentially insignificant and does not strike a significant blow towards the will itself. Again, Schopenhauer viewed asceticism, a practice with the potential to gradually weaken the will, as far more significant than suicide, which is in some sense an affirmation of the will in that it is the expression of an individual's desire to die. These differences between Wagner and Schopenhauer are essentially what prompted me to undertake writing a piece of music about the topic, because I am very intrigued by Schopenhauer's original philosophy and the Buddhist views it is similar to. Before talking about what I attempted to do in my own music, I would like to briefly discuss two other late romantic composer's approaches to the same problem.

Gustav Mahler is known to have used the process of composition as a way to personally think about and attempt to answer philosophical questions, like the meaning of life. His entire 3rd symphony is written around themes central to Schopenhauer's philosophy. Mahler, like Wagner, believed that the power of Love could overcome the Will. Both of these elements are given their own themes in his 3rd symphony, and as the music unfolds so too does a battle between these two opposing forces. The movements of the symphony progress in what they represent, beginning with nature, going through man, and ending with angels, although this last movement has also been described as the love movement.

The fourth movement, which introduces man, is the first place in the music to contain a vocal part, and the text nicely depicts the fundamental suffering that Schopenhauer associates with existence: “the world is deep... deeps is its woe.” The text is taken from a poem by Friedrich Nietzsche, whose original philosophical musings were prompted by conversations with Wagner and thus also influenced by Schopenhauer. The word ‘depth’ in the text fits nicely with Schopenhauer’s idea of the phenomenal and noumenal being two different layers of reality.

The last movement contains the piece’s climax depicting a battle between the Love and Will themes. The love theme ultimately wins, triumphantly, and the piece ends (all of the above programatic information comes from Hansen). My problem with Mahler’s approach is that he represents the philosophical aspects of the work motivically rather than integrating them into his musical language like Wagner. The strange thing is that Schopenhauer already did the work of linking the Will to musical language by stating that music is a manifestation of the Will, and by pointing out the desire, or willing, that occurs when certain musical devices are employed. If we were writing a piece of music to represent, for a random example, the union of two people in marriage, a motivic approach might make sense; we could create a motive, or melody, for each person, and as the characters grow closer, we could bring their themes closer together through various musical means: adjusting their styles to be more consistent, using increasingly related key areas, combining them in counterpoint, etc. Representing the Will with a motive, however, is strange because the Will is already inherent in our experience of music, unlike the idea of characters or of marriage. Music is literally, for Schopenhauer, another embodiment of the Will just like the phenomenal world, which is why it stimulates desire in listeners so effectively compared to other artistic media. We hear certain chords and a desire is created within us for them to resolve to specific other chords, which is essentially a direct experience of the Will. Thus

Mahler's approach of representing the Will with a motive seems to overlook an obvious fact, that it doesn't need to be represented. This would be analogous to writing a piece of music and having a motive representing sound, which should seem obviously absurd because sound is fundamentally a part of music.

Another problem with Mahler's approach is that the Love motive also uses tonal harmony, which, like the suspension that Schopenhauer used as an example, is particularly excellent at stimulating the Will in the listener. So although the Will motive is destroyed in the music, the Will itself is more alive than ever at the end of the piece, as we repeatedly have our desire stimulated by dominant chords which resolve to the tonic. Thus Mahler has actually accidentally represented Schopenhauer's philosophy in a way that he didn't intend to, opposing his own conscious interpretation that Love can counter the Will, by showing a Will that is fundamentally inescapable.

Richard Strauss, although he lived significantly later than Wagner, often shared the other composer's late romantic aesthetic and language. Strauss was also influenced by philosophy, especially Nietzsche, but also Schopenhauer's and Wagner's. His opera *Elektra*, although not particularly well known for representing these themes, is, in my view, very similar to *Tristan und Isolde* in the way that it presents the act of living as being synonymous with being in a state of desire. In *Tristan und Isolde*, like I already described, the main characters have a desire to be together that Wagner portrays as only being achievable through death. In *Elektra*, the eponymous main character is obsessed with obtaining revenge on her mother, Clytemnestra, for the murder of her father, to the point that this one singular desire dominates her life. At the end of the opera Elektra's brother, Orestes, returns to the household and kills Clytemnestra and her new husband. This satisfies Elektra's desire and she dies. The explanation for this initially shocking and

nonsensical turn of events is that Elektra essentially has no reason to live now that she has obtained fulfillment of her one desire. Strauss and Hofmannsthal (the librettist) clearly depict living and desiring as being intimately linked, and therefore once all desire is fulfilled, life logically must end as well.

Musically, *Elektra* is interesting because Strauss incorporates moments of relatively extreme (for the time) dissonance and atonality. These were included as a sort of experiment in a more Modernist harmonic language (which Strauss subsequently abandoned in his later operas) and to represent the graphic nature of the libretto (Robinson chapter 8). The end of the opera is very tonal and triumphant, even though a murder is taking place, which is interesting because the presence of chords needing to resolve, and then resolving, lets listeners directly experience the same kind of release that Elektra is feeling as her desire is fulfilled. The non-tonal sections of *Elektra* are often dissonant and somewhat jarring, so in this sense Strauss clearly avoids setting up the same kinds of musical expectations and resolutions that are present at the end of the opera, thereby avoiding as direct a stimulation of the Will in listeners.

Ultimately, Elektra dies and the opera ends. The music obviously must stop here too, but it is almost as if, having resolved itself, it also has nothing left to do and must therefore end as well. Although *Elektra* deals with similar elements as *Tristan und Isolde* in this way, it is different in that Strauss does not attempt to present some kind of solution to the problem of the Will. The presence of the Will can be used to help explain the ending of the opera, but Elektra's fate is not one that concertgoers typically empathize with and aspire to attain. Thus the Will is an important part of the plot, but not something that Strauss or Hofmannsthal attack and attempt to overcome in the manner of Wagner or Mahler.

For my project I wanted to deeply integrate philosophy and musical language in the style of Wagner. I was also interested in more closely representing the original philosophy of Schopenhauer, meaning I would not add my own interpretations on top, such as death or love defeating the Will in some epic metaphysical battle. For this reason I studied Buddhist sources dealing with the negation of desire, because this (specifically asceticism and meditation) is a method that Schopenhauer endorsed for gaining an understanding of noumenal reality and in essence, resisting the Will. Since Wagner did such a good job using functional harmony, an integral part of tonality, to stimulate the Will in his listeners, I wanted to include some tonal elements but contrast them with atonality, like in *Elektra* as I mentioned above, as a way to represent the negation of desire. I will now discuss the various problems with my own approach that I encountered over the course of writing, its successes, and how all of this influences the final version of my piece.

The first problem is that musical desire is extremely difficult to negate. Although tonal harmony is excellent at creating the desire for a specific resolution, completely removing desire from music is very difficult, perhaps impossible, and probably more dependent on the individual listener than the music itself. Both specifically and stereotypically the word 'atonality' is associated with a style of music known as 'Expressionism,' which is typically very dissonant. One could imagine, if I wrote a piece that moved from tonality, which is relatively consonant, to expressionistic atonality, that the listeners would probably gain the desire for the 'pretty' tonal part to come back. Upon listening to straight atonal expressionism, many average listeners are instilled with the desire for the piece to end. Furthermore, expectations and desires can be created harmonically or melodically in atonal music, or in tonal music but with elements that are not related to pitch, such as rhythm or texture.

Another problem, one evident in my final piece, is that the musical language required to show the negation of desire is extremely derivative. By this I mean that it is dependent on many external things, such as other pieces of music. The same could actually be said of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Music theory distinguishes between several types of cadences (typically the end of a phrase), the two of importance here being the authentic and the deceptive. The authentic cadence sounds as if tension is being properly resolved; the deceptive cadence, however, sounds somewhat shocking, as we are typically given two of the notes we expect but also a third, musically unexpected note. This is one device that Wagner uses to continually frustrate and spin out our musical desire in *Tristan und Isolde* (personal analysis of the score). The problem with this approach is that it relies on listeners expecting authentic cadences and hearing deceptive cadences. Although this could be the subject of another research grant entirely, I will voice my opinion here that mathematically (perhaps 'inherently' is a better word) there is no reason we should expect to hear one type of cadence instead of the other. Rather, we have been conditioned, by listening to large amounts of tonal music, where authentic cadences are prevalent, to expect them. Thus if someone was born and raised never having listened to tonal music, and was first exposed to *Tristan und Isolde*, their mind would probably deduce, quite correctly in this case, that deceptive cadences are the norm, and that authentic cadences sound strange in comparison. Thus the work derives much of its emotional impact from the listener's familiarity with other music.

Although most listeners probably don't perceive this as a problem, as a composer with the desire to produce pieces that are both unified and original, this aspect of my proposal has plagued my compositional process from the beginning. The majority of my final piece lacks tonality, except for a few measures in the middle. This does certainly draw out some sense of

desire for resolution in my ear, although this isn't really indicative of anything extraordinary in my musical language, rather just the fact that I am familiar with tonality from hearing it in other settings. Furthermore, the sense of desire created in my piece is probably less than in a completely tonal piece, since the tonal musical language, when it happens, is relatively unexpected, and the listener's mind might not be able to deduce immediately whether to 'buy into it' and expect a 'normal' tonal resolution. My piece is fairly well unified motivically, but I struggled to produce a unified harmonic language that produces the effect I wanted. Perhaps I can find solace in the fact that, as I reasoned above, Wagner's language was also harmonically derivative and dependent on outside influences for its sense of unification.

Although Schopenhauer and Wagner both dealt primarily with desire, I also wanted to represent the Buddhist conception of the self. The notion of self is important and related because when we have desires, we normally think of them as coming 'from' the self, or as being a part of or applying to the self. The traditional Buddhist perspective, however, is that there is no separate, fixed, volitional entity outside of our moment to moment experience that can or should be labeled as the self. The Buddha taught this as one of the Three Characteristics that apply to all phenomenal things, the other two being the notion of impermanence and inherent suffering or unease, which is essentially the equivalent of Schopenhauer's idea of the Will. Since it is difficult to understand, I will give a brief description of the *anatta* (no self) doctrine in the next paragraph before returning to my discussion of the music. The arguments below are nicely outlined in the book Buddhism, Knowledge and Liberation by David Burton.

The arguments given for anatta are varied and multitudinous, so I will not even attempt to overview all of them here. It should also be understood that ultimately, anatta is something that Buddhists aspire to actually experience and live, rather than understand on an intellectual level.

Since it helps understand the whole of Buddhist philosophy and my research grant, I will overview some arguments here anyways. When we typically think of our 'self' we ascribe it various properties, such as being volitional and controlling our actions. Buddhist thought further divides our phenomenal reality into five interrelated *skandhas* (aggregates): form (for example the body), sensation or feeling (such as pain or happiness), perception or discrimination (essentially the recognition of distinct objects), mental formations (like thoughts and opinions), and lastly consciousness or awareness. It is clear that when our reality is divided up in this way, we cannot attribute properties like volition to any one of these elements. Fundamentally we may believe that the 'I' or our 'self' is equivalent to form, i.e. our body, but most of us would still feel like the same person if we were, for example, missing a hand. On another level, we know that the cells in our bodies are constantly being replaced, so that from day to day, our body changes drastically. It has been hypothesized that over the course of 10 years every single cell in our body dies and is replaced with a new one. If this is true, then it is very curious that our sense of self remains relatively constant over this time period, and further points to the fact that the self cannot be equated with the first aggregate of material form. On another hand it seems like perhaps our thoughts control our body, and are therefore the volitional controlling 'self'. In this case, Buddhists would say there are times when we feel as if our thoughts are controlling something, like the act of walking, yet other times when we are thinking about something else entirely and the aforementioned act is still happening. This implies that on a certain level the processes that occur in the body occur without the intervention of conscious thought. Also, there are times when thought disappears, perhaps when we are absorbed in an activity like running or listening to music, implying that the self, if it is to be equated with the aggregate of mental processes, is extremely fleeting and transient, a property that certainly does not fit all with our

intuitive sense of self. Regarding sensation and feeling, advocates of anatta frequently acknowledge that there is indeed a 'sense' of self, but then question what this sense points towards, or if there is any part of it that is inherently more self like than other things we sense, like anger, happiness or hungriness. Although this may not have been a convincing overview, hopefully it gives enough of an overview of the anatta doctrine to at least show that it has some logical ground and deserves serious consideration.

Whereas desire in listeners can actually be stimulated by music, it seems identity can only be represented. This is a common thing for composers to do, for example Richard Strauss's tone poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, based on the eponymous text by Nietzsche, which uses many musical leitmotifs that are representational of their subject matter on a purely abstract level. I represent the conception of the self with the presence of a collection of pitches. The beginning and end of the piece are chromatically saturated, that is, they contain all twelve pitches in approximately equal proportion (although not exactly proportional in the manner of serialism), so there should be no specific pitch collection that jumps out. In the middle of the piece, however, I create a specific, typically diatonic (major or minor), collection of pitches, which slowly shifts around, representing the constantly changing nature of our identities according to Buddhist thought, and eventually gives rise to the entirely tonal section, representing and hopefully stimulating desire. In this way I have connected a sense of identity and desire in a way similar to Buddhist psychology and philosophy, where part of transcending desires is in the ability to unidentify with them and allow them to simply exist without the need to be fulfilled. Nearing the end of the piece, the fixed key and tonality disappear, dissolving both identity and desire, returning to the slow moving chromatically saturated harmony that began the piece and does not stimulate the desire for any particular resolution.

I also, in order to represent the dissolution of identity, have the main motive of the piece dissolve into fragments. This is somewhat backwards of the 'normal' course of western music, particularly the sonata form, where a theme is exposed, then developed, where it often undergoes drastic change, and then finally recapped in a manner somewhat similar to the exposition. In my piece, the main theme is exposed, first in an atonal setting, then repeated tonally, and finally disintegrated as the piece ends. Again, this represents the idea of the self, and the inherent desire that comes with a sense of self, as something that can be overcome through meditation and understanding of anatta, or, as Schopenhauer would have said, the negation of the Will.

Overall I believe I did an acceptable job of integrating the philosophy I read with the music I wrote. I learned a great deal about the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Buddhism, and I felt my abilities as a composer grow as well. I am anxious to attempt a project like this again once my technical skills as a composer are at a higher level. In the future I would like to attempt to write a series of shorter pieces, or several movements of one piece, which explore a variety of different ways of confronting the idea of the Will and negating desire in a musical setting.

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