

Dal Bon, Bruno. 2020. *La Gioia Sovrana: Nietzsche e la Musica come Filosofia*. Milano: Mimesis Edizioni.

Reviewed by Pietro Molteni

A luxurious hotel resembling a castle, built on a hill in the middle of the Swiss Alps. A few dozen of meters downslope, a white house bordered by fir trees. Every year, devoted scholars visit the house, touch the furniture, enter the modest room that the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche used to rent every summer from the early 1880s until his mental breakdown, in 1888. In that cramped room, one of the most disruptive thinkers of the last two millennia prophesied the dawn of a Godless world: our own.

In the gorgeous central hall of said Waldhaus Hotel in Sils-Maria, after speaking at a concert conference about the string quartets by two Nietzsche's friends, Bruno Dal Bon told me about the book he had just finished writing: *La Gioia Sovrana* ("The Sovereign Joy"). He is a gray-haired, handsome man with deep eyes and a great dialectic ability. He combines the activities of orchestra conductor, teacher, and music divulgator with an extraordinary ability as a cultural promoter. Writing about Nietzsche and music is a hard task – the subject is indeed well-known and covered. Hundreds of pages were written in the twentieth century on this topic (the research about music and dance in Greek culture, the tumultuous relationship with Wagner, and so on), but Dal Bon has been able to shed light on a few aspects never discussed before. His hybrid nature, which drives both his professional music activities and his unrelenting interest in philosophy is the reason for this. Two pretexts led Dal Bon to write such a book. The first one is his temper, shared with Nietzsche, to consider music not as an object to contemplate, but as a vital energy flow able to elevate, disrupt, and revolutionize. The second one is his friendship with Michel Onfray - one of the most influential French philosophers, simultaneously acclaimed and loathed as a celebrity by the French cultural and political world due to his extreme and too-honest ideas. In one of his fundamental works, *Decadence* (2017), Onfray (who encouraged Dal Bon to write this book) appointed Nietzsche's "God is dead" statement as the end of the Jewish-Christian age, a path that started with the birth of Christ and is now finished forever, catapulting the West into a crisis of values never seen before.

The central point of *La Gioia Sovrana* is: Nietzsche loved the operetta. This simple statement is as "disorienting as the apparition of the Virgin Mary in a freethought congress" (9), to use the words of Onfray, who contributed the foreword. Music plays a fundamental role in Nietzsche's philosophy and the specific significance of the operetta cannot be overlooked. Dal Bon dedicates the book's last and longest chapter to the operetta. First, he analyzes the importance of music not just in Nietzsche's philosophy, but also in his private life.

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Since he was a child, Nietzsche devoted himself to practicing piano and composing. The first fragment of one of his compositions dates back to 1854, when he was 10 years old. Having to constantly move during his life, renting a piano was an issue he faced continuously. In his letters, Nietzsche complained about the rental fees and the short time to practice. The piano was the instrument best suited to compose, to familiarize oneself with the works of great composers, and to improvise. He loved to improvise, and his friends admired him for that, though he defined it as “ridiculous” (35). The piano accompanied him even in moments of madness, such as when his friend Franz Overbeck found him screaming at the instrument in his Turin home. In his final years in Jena, he would often request to leave the clinic to play a piano in a nearby restaurant.

At the piano, Nietzsche composed seventy-four works, which are gathered in the edition by Curt Paul Janz (*Der Musikalische Nechlass*, Bärenreiter, 2005) and include: Lieder for voice and piano, compositions for piano solo and piano four-hands, one melologue, some choral pieces, the *Hymn to Life* for choir and orchestra, and many unfinished works. With the exception of five, all of these were composed between 1854 and 1865, during his teenage years. Nietzsche wanted to find a way to express cosmic pain, often using bold harmonic figures, while at the same time he was inspired by the works of classic composers who were able to “lighten up the soul and drive away gloomy thoughts” (17). His most beloved composer was Robert Schumann who was considered “a reference equal to Schopenhauer” (20). Phrases like this demonstrate that, in Nietzsche’s thoughts, the line between philosophy and music is extremely thin, and Dal Bon ably analyzes this by delving into lesser unknown Nietzsche’s scores. One piece which offers food for thought on this topic is the enigmatic *Das Fragment an sicht* (“Fragment in Itself”), a touching three-line piano composition, that ends with the words: *da capo con malinconia* (“da capo with sadness”), without the last bar line. This piece was conceived to be played *da capo* endlessly and Dal Bon notes it is an anomaly when compared to typical cyclical musical forms, such as the canon, in which there usually aren’t new expressive indications. Dal Bon asks: “Why just the second time *con malinconia*? And if this eternal replicate is to be played endlessly, should it always be melancholic except for the first time? And why does he use this specific term among many other possible ones?” (24). No answer, except for a reference to *Aurora* (1881), a text in dialogue form where Nietzsche reflects on the sadness that comes over him cyclically like the water in Venice where “the waves slosh in the lake of my melancholy” (24). However, the endless fragment also serves as a sonic representation of the concept of eternal return, which is a key focus of his philosophy. Considering that Nietzsche focused his composition activity in his early twenties, Dal Bon advances a theory: “From 1865 his artistic inspiration slowed down abruptly and underwent a complex metamorphosis that from music merged into philosophy. Nietzsche became a

philosopher thanks to music, thanks to his progressive detachment from musical action that slowly became philosophical action” (22).

This argument is supported by the genesis of Nietzsche’s early fundamental work *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) where “even in his philological studies of ancient Greece, it is music that remains the primary driving force behind Nietzsche’s pursuits” (37). Since his first year as a professor at Basel University, in 1869, Nietzsche dedicated his teachings to the function of rhythm in ancient times. In this period, he also worked on unpublished essays “The Greek Rhythm,” “Notes on Rhythm and Metrics,” “On the Theory of Quantitative Rhythm,” and “Rhythmical Studies” (38). He conceived of two rhythmical concepts of the Greek philosopher Aristoxenus: the *eurhythmyia* (a ‘well’ rhythm that reflects the right proportion between parts and the whole) and the *alogia* (which means the lack of a rational metric rapport). *Alogia* doesn’t mean chaos, but “the construction of a more complex rhythm, elaborated through the use of even and odd measures that Greek people perceived primarily through dance” (44). The profound understanding of this concept led Nietzsche to associate the *alogia* with Dionysism, the primordial creative force of Greek culture, that deeply revolutionized the vision of Greek civilization and then the very roots of the West. In the Dionysiac force, there is also the comic component that Nietzsche took into great consideration, and that ancient Greeks conveyed in their comedy. Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) indeed expresses his wisdom in laughter and dance, on the contrary, the philosopher despised seriousness, all that makes life burdensome, and those who refuse the vital energy of art such as philologists, priests, and also Plato who “stepped on his deeply artistic nature” (49).

When talking about Nietzsche and music, it is impossible to not dedicate a chapter to his renowned and tumultuous relationship with Wagner. Yet Dal Bon skips some of the best-known biographical events to focus on what the music of Wagner meant to Nietzsche. The philosopher came into contact with the piano score reduction of *Tristan und Isolde* in March 1861, before he was even seventeen-years-old. He played it on the piano for years and was overwhelmed: “In *Ecce Homo*, the encounter with *Tristan* is first described as a drug” (62). He literally compared its effect with that of hashish, describing its “narcotic charm” as binding (62). The relationship with Wagner started with this opera played on the piano. It was only after seven years, in 1868, that Nietzsche had the opportunity to listen to the prelude performed by an orchestra and, after three more years, to attend the performance of the entire work, which he concludes should be listened to without singers, as a “gigantic symphony” (64). Dal Bon elaborates: “The invitation to the instrumental listening as the only possibility to reach the origin of the *furious desire to existence* and the desire of a man, himself, able to completely rely upon this music without being protected by the drama, by

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the words, by the rhythmical measure, are elements that demonstrate how Nietzsche felt a victim of this score” (64).

The complete refusal of Wagner’s music and his conception of art was concretized on New Year’s Eve 1878 when Nietzsche decided to part ways with his *Tristan und Isolde* score signed by Wagner, giving it to his friend Henrich Köselitz. At the same time, he left Germany and, from that moment, spent his summers in Sils-Maria, Switzerland and winters in Italy and France. Again, a new phase of his personal and philosophical life corresponded to a new musical taste. German music was now considered “ambiguous, arrogant, suffocating” (71) while Southern-European music was pure, free, and “unconscious of good and evil” (72). Dal Bon insists on Nietzsche’s invitation to *méditerraniser la musique* (Mediterranean-ize music) so that “he is not limited to expressing a preference, a taste, a sterile contrast between geography or style. Nietzsche wants first to indicate a philosophical path. It feels that southern music is the privileged way to say yes to life, nothing more” (72). These are the years of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his magnum opus, and Nietzsche didn’t hesitate to say: “Maybe it is possible to consider all my Zarathustra as music, and surely one of its prerequisites was the rebirth in the art of listening” (73). In November 1881, he wrote to a friend with great excitement about having discovered something thrilling: the opera *Carmen*, by Georges Bizet, staged in Genoa’s “Paganini” theatre. His excitement was such that he wrote: “I didn’t know something like this was possible!” (73). He bought the piano reduction score and filled it up with notes, writing his impressions on the page. Some of them are simple critiques related to the score itself, for instance: “Here the piano reduction is very insufficient” (75). Others are emotions, descriptions and calls for reflection, such as his remarks on the choir of cigarette girls: “This choir is like the breeze that blows in Epicurus’s Garden: reflect what is idealized in this piece” (77). However, there are also larger critiques, such as his comment on the duet between Micaela and Don José: “The duet is at a lower level than my taste – too sentimental, too Tannhäuser-like [Tannhäuserhaft]. Moreover, the *mommy* culture is French – we feel in a different way” (78). Nietzsche attended twenty performances of *Carmen* and, in vain, sought to find the same energy in other Bizet operas. Despite this, Bizet didn’t become a substitute for Wagner in Nietzsche’s view. Dal Bon is very clear on this issue: “The truth that Nietzsche gleaned from *Carmen* was not intended to establish anything; it simply reflected the will of immediate life, which emphasizes experiencing things for what they are in the present moment. The music of *Carmen*, with its ability to encapsulate destiny in a single gesture, even if that gesture is from an operetta, embodied this truth” (93).

It is strange to associate the name of Nietzsche - who in our collective imagination is a gloomy and apocalyptic character - with the operetta, a powerful symbol of an era filled with optimism and confidence in the future. Dal Bon

dedicates a long chapter to this topic and begins by describing the importance of the operetta in the late nineteenth century, as a new genre capable of “dissolving the cramp of life” (K. Kraus cited in Dal Bon 2020, 97). He continues: “Whereas Europe was inspired by the Romantic spirit, the operetta became popular in Paris. It was a type of show that undermined the principles of a world dominated by poetic idealization and sentimental accents. With the operetta, logic and unreason were lost in each other, giving space to the misunderstanding and the absurd which became rules for a world without rules” (95).

Nietzsche knew the operetta when he was a university student. Even though he was conscious that this genre was despised in the mainstream music world, he was in search of lightness. In a letter to his friend E. Rhode, he ended with: “...but now it’s time to finish this letter, drink the whey and listen to bad music” (98). Nietzsche conveyed in his private letters his will to mimic life, his hatred for the too-serious philologists, and his disdain for “absurd Swiss patriotism, that, like Swiss cheese, comes from sheep” (98). This approach to reality accompanied him throughout his life, as Dal Bon describes: “In Nietzsche’s soul, depth and frivolity coexist, the silence of extreme loneliness and the euphoria of the comedian. Extreme opposites, in a relentless exercise for survival, find rest, enjoyment, and vital affirmation in light, ironic, cheerful music” (98). Nietzsche recognized the importance of the operetta in society more than his contemporaries: “What is the dominant melody in Europe, the *idée fixe musicale*? The melody of an operetta (except for the deaf and Wagner)” (103) and talked about Offenbach as a “saint”. It is surprising that, in an age where antisemitism was spreading in much of Europe, he described Jewish culture as the creator of this healthy and liberating art form: “Jewish people, in the art, come close to genius, H. Heine and Offenbach, this brave and hilarious satyr [...] constitutes the liberation from the psychic and *degenerated* German-Romantic musicians” (Nietzsche cited in Dal Bon 2020, 107). In short, the philosopher whose views were often used in support of Nazi claims, denounced German art to be “degenerated” (107).

Despite this, his heart continued to beat in time with Spanish music, which he had come to know and love through *Carmen*. In 1888, shortly before his final mental breakdown that silenced him forever, he discovered the Spanish *zarzuela*, a kind of Spanish operetta rich in irony, dances, and popular music. He was fascinated by *La Gran Via* (1886), one of the most famous zarzuelas, a surreal comedy set in Madrid. It gave the final push of energy to the philosopher who “after being engrained by *Tristan und Isolde*, and *Carmen*, now seems to indulge to the rhythm of this zarzuela and these Spanish dances, reaching the extreme point of a radiant feeling, full of playful brightness” (125). The contrast between these two types of music, and two ways of seeing life, is the subject of his last letter to his friend, the composer Peter Gast, before his breakdown. Nietzsche wrote:

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“...this psychological antithesis will be the right way to understand me – *la gran via* [written in Spanish]” (127). Then, the darkness.

Dal Bon's *La Gioia Sovrana* provides more than a description of the role of music in Nietzsche's biography. It reveals above all that music is a primary force in the philosophical contributions of one of the key figures of the secularized West. Additionally, the book highlights the importance of comedy and lightness in philosophical action. Lastly, it demonstrates the importance of music as a way to philosophize, both to dig into the depths and darkness of ourselves with Wagner and to face our world with the lightness and foolhardiness of an operetta.

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