

# Strauss, Nietzsche and Christianity<sup>1</sup>.

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*When during my stay in Egypt (1892), I became familiar with the works of Nietzsche, whose polemic against Christianity was particularly to my liking, the antipathy which I had always felt against a religion which relieves the faithful of responsibility for their actions (by means of confession) was confirmed and strengthened. (Recollections and Reflections, 1949).*

*It is clear to me that the German nation will achieve new creative energy only by liberating itself from Christianity. Private Diary entry, after the death of Mahler (1911).*

Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German philologist and philosopher, best known today for his writings from the 1880s, which included “Beyond Good and Evil”, “Also Sprach Zarathustra” and “The Antichrist”. His saying “God is dead” has become part of European culture. He was an atheist who viewed belief in a supernatural God as a comfortable delusion. Nietzsche had a particular harsh criticism of Christianity. It was more “otherworldly”, rejecting this world more than other religions – for example Judaism or the Religions of Rome and Greece. There have, of course, been atheists throughout human history. What differentiated Nietzsche was that he realised that without God, many other cherished beliefs of mankind, such as reason, rationality and morality were without the divine foundation that generations of philosophers (from Plato to Kant) had built upon. He was a controversial figure in the newly unified Germany at this time: his other “untimely” thoughts were a contempt for German nationalism and the anti-Semitism which often accompanied it. Within less than a decade two composers set his ideas to music: Mahler in his third symphony, and Strauss in his tone poem Also Sprach Zarathustra, both completed in 1896. Why would any composer be so interested in and inspired by Philosophy?

In the second half of the nineteenth century, philosophy mattered for many German composers. Composers worried about the aesthetic foundations of music, what made music valuable. Nietzsche and Wagner had been friends, but fell out because of conflicting views on the nature of music. One dimension of this was the debate about whether music should be “absolute” or “programmatic”. Nowadays, these debates may seem to be a fuss over nothing much. However, it was different in the period before 1900. The young Richard

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<sup>1</sup> Strauss, Nietzsche and Christianity *Richard Strauss Society Newsletter*, October 2016. London 62, pages 16-20.

Strauss was part of these lively debates, which had many dimensions. In the mid 1880s, Strauss had come to adopt a Schopenhauerian view of music as the purest expression of the human will. He first came across Nietzsche on his Egyptian sojourn in 1893 (as mentioned in the quote) and was captivated and remained a Nietzschean for many years. This manifested itself mostly in a rejection of the metaphysical ideas cherished by most of his contemporaries and fellow composers. For example, in a works like *Tristan and Isolde*, Wagner had put forward the idea of redemption through love, and that love could find its resolution in death. In *Feuersnot*, in contrast, love is consummated in the physical act of sex. Humans live in a physical world and there is nothing else. Joy and fulfilment are to be found in appreciation of the world we live in, not some metaphysical otherworld.

How far did Strauss buy into the Nietzschean world view? Well, he certainly had a negative view of Christianity. The second quote above says that both Mahler and Wagner both succumbed to the consolation of Christianity. For Strauss, his ideal was: "moral purification through one's own strength, liberation through work, worship of eternal, magnificent nature." He dedicated his Alpine Symphony to the memory of Mahler. It is of course a celebration of nature, but also the life (and death) of an artist – the earliest sketches had the working title "Tragedy of an artist" (and also later the more explicitly Nietzschean "The Antichrist"). In the mid 1890s, Strauss's new world view is reflected in the company he kept. John Henry Mackay, the poet who provided Strauss with the lyrics some of one his most successful songs "*Morgen!*", was an anarchist and sexual libertine; Richard Dehmel, a socialist whose was convicted of blasphemy and his poems banned (Strauss set 12 of his poems, including *Befreit* and *Arbeitsmann*). Things had moved on a long way from the thirteen year old Strauss who had written a Mass in D Major for mixed chorus in 1877.

However, there is little evidence that Strauss bought into much more than the rejection of the metaphysical and celebration of the imminent. More important than his love of nature was Strauss's love of humanity, not in an abstract way, but a love of real human beings and the family. This was a focus of much of his music: most clearly in the *Domestic symphony*, *Intermezzo*, and also in the *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. Indeed, Willi Schuh's *Strauss the Early Years* starts with a quote from Strauss near the end of his life: "Why don't people see what is new in my work, how in them, as is found only in Beethoven, the human being visibly plays a part in the work". In two of his operas, *Daphne* and the *Loves of Danae*, the main character rejects the divine to love the mortal. The empress in *Die Frau* envies the love of the Dyer for his wife.

When Strauss does talk of the "divine", he is invariably talking about music and art. In his 1903 essay "on Inspiration", Strauss wrote:

"Melody as revealed in the greatest works of our classics is one of the most noble gifts which an invisible deity has bestowed on mankind."

“Mozart's melodies, Beethoven's symphonies, Schubert's songs, acts two and three of *Tristan* are symbols in which are revealed the most profound spiritual truths. They are not "invented", but are "given in their dreams" to those privileged to receive them. Whence they come no one knows, not even their creator, the unconscious mouthpiece of the demiurge.”

His use of the terms “invisible deity” and “demiurge” indicate a metaphorical use of the terms. The ideas come from “nowhere”.

Explicit depictions of religion or religious ideas are rare in Strauss. The main exception is of course the opera *Salome*. However, the libretto is Wilde's: Strauss's adaption of the text of Wilde's play consists of editing it down. In *Die Schweigsame Frau*, Aminta in her role as Timidia adopts the persona of a devout Catholic girl: the purpose here is one of caricature (both Zweig and Strauss poking fun at the Catholicism of their home towns), despite the fact that in Sir Morosus's England open Catholicism would have been rare. A few of Strauss Lieder have religious content - for example the Lutheran “*Die Ulme zu Hirsau*” (1899), but these are more often of classical content – for example the orchestral song “*Gesang der Apollopriesterin*” (1895).

Throughout his life Strauss read Goethe: towards the end of world war two he read through the entire life works of Goethe (during which time he composed *Metamorphosen*). Goethe himself was not an adherent to Christianity (although raised as a Lutheran): he believed in the divine, but saw Christianity of the church as a "hodgepodge of fallacy and violence". He is best described as a pantheist and humanist. One can see Strauss's worldview as being influenced by both Nietzsche and Goethe. Both rejected the institutional religion of Christianity. Nietzsche went further and rejected the idea of anything metaphysical, be it reason, truth or god. Goethe was a child of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and still had a general belief in the universal god, seeing it manifested in beauty and art. Strauss shared the rejection of Christianity of both thinkers. Rejecting the metaphysical, he wanted to celebrate nature and humanity with his music. However, his philosophical views were somewhere in between the two when it came to art and beauty. He uses the word divine when speaking of great music. Indeed, he uses the Kantian term “thing in itself” when writing about Mozart's music in 1944:

“Untrammelled by any mundane form, the Mozartian melody is the “Ding an Sich”. It hovers like Plato's Eros between heaven and earth, between mortality and immortality...”.

To me this indicates that towards the end of his life at least, his view had become perhaps more Goethean than Nietzschean. He believed that there was something worthwhile and good in the universe: art.

To conclude, Strauss was clearly not a Christian: he shared the criticism of Christianity of both of his mentors, Nietzsche and Goethe. Whether he was an atheist is harder to pin

down. He certainly did not believe in the personal God of religion. Religion was not a part of his world-view or outlook. However, there is some evidence that, at least in later life, he had the notion that there was something in art that was "not of this world". However, this should not be exaggerated. For much of his life his attention was mainly on celebrating Nature and Humanity and this is what we find most in his music: it inspired Strauss to create his greatest works of art.