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The choral music of Friedrich Nietzsche. The cultural environment and the Christmas Oratorio (1860-1861)

1. The University of Halle

Research into the choral and religious music composed by Friedrich Nietzsche during his youth, as essential as it might be, must necessarily face some wider issues such as the Christian education he received, the Prussian romantic pietism, persistent elements of the late Enlightenment, and the relationship between music and Lutheranism. Moreover, any reconstruction, though rough, should start from the University of Halle and from that faculty of Theology where Carl Ludwig Nietzsche, Friedrich's father, studied. As well as Carl Moritz Weber, the dean of a private institute Nietzsche attended in Naumburg; Robert Buddensieg, his tutor at the time he attended Pforta high school, and many other friends, masters and acquaintances who belonged to the circle of his childhood.

When Carl Ludwig Nietzsche arrives at Halle, the cultural situation was very lively and complex, focused on the endless debate between rationalists and pietists. Since its foundation (1694) by Phillip Jacob Spener, Pietism's Father, the contrast between *faith* and *reason* had always been a central topic, already animated by the two main protagonists: Hermann Francke, directly called by Spener to teach Theology and Christian Wolff, prominent exponent of the German enlightened rationalism.¹

What happened between Franke and Wolff summarises the history of the University and the cultural seasons in Prussia.² Until the mid 18th century, Pietism was the leading current, politically intertwined with

the creation of the absolute monarchy by Frederick William I who, fascinated and impressed by the strictness of pietist education, would not only grant them several privileges but also favour their admission to key state positions.³ Only with Frederick II would the Great pietism primacy be mitigated thanks to an enlightened and Franco-ophile cultural policy.

At the time of Carl Ludwig Nietzsche in 1830s, the faculty of Theology was still divided in these two currents: a persistent enlightened rationalism, really weakened by that time, and the nineteenth-century pietism represented by the figure of Friedrich August Tholuck, pivotal character in the Prussian academic context. Friedrich Nietzsche's education came from the latter, from an idea of Christianity as a "matter of heart", from a primacy of the inwardness over any rationalisation, from an absolute value of music practice.

2. The discovery of music

As a child, Nietzsche met music through educational frames typical of the *Hausmusik* tradition, when his father Carl Ludwig Nietzsche sat at the piano and improvised. This is an element that seems to give an almost religious sense to music: for Nietzsche it will always be related to important, nearly sacred, life experiences. Though self-taught, at the end of 1856 he was already able to play Beethoven's op.79 and several transcriptions of Haydn symphonies. In 1858, he asked for "extracts for piano of the *Requiem* [by Mozart] and Haydn's *Creation*"⁴ for Christmas, while shortly after he sent off for "Cramer's studies. Otherwise I forget every-

¹ Cfr. H. Freydank, *Die Universität Halle, Ihre Anstalten, Institute und Kliniken, Stadt und Umgebung*, Linder, Düsseldorf 1928, p. 10.

² Cfr. W. Schrader, *Geschichte der Friedrichs-Universität zu Halle*, 2 voll., Ferd. Dümmlers Verlagsbuchhandlung, Berlin 1894.

³ Cfr. M. Fulbrook, *Piety and Politics. Religion and the Rise of Absolutism in England, Württemberg and Prussia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983, p. 168 and ff.

⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Letters*, No.38, p. 33 (letter of 28 November 1858).

thing I've learnt and lose practice".⁵ He will also later recommend an advanced book on piano technique to his sister: "once learnt, although they are not easy especially for beginners, they reward your efforts much more than Czerny studies".⁶

The idea to compose came to Nietzsche on a precise date, the 25 May 1854, Ascension Day.⁷ Little Fritz, as he was confidently called at home, was not ten yet and is attending the celebrations at St. Wenzel church where he heard the *Hallelujah* from Händel's *Messiah*. Later he would remember:

I felt myself moved to join the singing, which appeared to me as the Angels choir of joy who accompanied the rise of Jesus Christ to Heaven with their voices. I immediately took the firm decision to compose something similar. When I returned from church, I started working right away and with every new chord I played I felt a childish joy.⁸

By following this story it is also easier to understand the sense of a brief Nietzsche's consideration written in 1858 and entitled *Sulla musica (About music)* whose main belief is that "God gave us music *firstly* to lead us upwards". Music, while also having secondary effects, can actually "elevate, joke, it can amuse us and soften the rudest soul with the sweetness of its melancholic notes", however its "main task is [...] to guide our thoughts upwards, in order to elevate us, to touch us in the deep". From this premise also directly derives the need of intelligibility and clarity in music that finds, especially in singing, the most suitable means to elevate the soul "towards the Good and the Truth". For this reason, all those "modern composers [that] strive to

write obscurely" are to be banned. Then if Beethoven, Bach, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Haydn and Mozart are the "only pillars" of music, the negative reference for the young Nietzsche is "above all this so called 'music of the future' by a Liszt or a Berlioz [that] plans to propose pieces of music that are as eccentric as possible".⁹

In order to completely understand these early reflections and underline the role religious music played in the first years of his life, it is necessary to make a short overview of the nineteenth-century heritage of pietism, to wit the so-called awakening movements (*Erweckungsbewegung*). They arose in central and northern Germany (Saxony, Thuringia, Silesia, East and West Prussia) during the Napoleonic occupation and thrived in the aftermath of the expulsion of the French invader. The Lutheran awakening in particular, in this area of Germany, was inseparably joined to music, which thus became the vehicle of a new renaissance of spirituality. These are the first years of romanticism and of the age of several music "renaissances" that animated it, especially Händel and Palestrina, far before Johann Sebastian Bach: music and religion cannot therefore be separate from this season.

It is important to say a few words on the first two names since they are crucial in Nietzsche's music education. Halle, again, is the city symbol of Nietzsche's childhood because Halle, apart from being the place where all his tutors studied, is also the centre of Händel's renaissance. Concerts dedicated to Händel's music were promoted by Daniel Gottlob Türk (1750-1813), chorister at the Ulrichskirche of Halle, organist at the Marktkirche, also in Halle and eventually music professor at the university from 1779. As a professor, from the early nineteenth century, he organized musical entertainments and the first regular performances of

⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Letters*, No.50, p. 43 (letter written shortly before 27 January 1859).

⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Letters*, No.63, p. 57 (letter probably written on 3 April 1859).

⁷ All Nietzsche's compositions have been edited by C.P. Janz in a critical edition, in F. Nietzsche, *Der Musikalische Nachlaß*, Bärenreiter, Basel 1977.

⁸ *Complete Works*, vol. I, t. I, p. 32.

⁹ All the quotes are taken from: *Complete Works*. Vol. I, t. I, p. 41-42.

Händel's Oratorios,¹⁰ really influencing the pietist reference par excellence of that time, that is to say the previously cited theologian Tholuck.

Palestrina's renaissance, on the contrary, started in Berlin but at the same time follows the path of the awakening movements in the Prussian area. In Berlin worked Johann Friedrich Reichardt (1752-1814), born in Königsberg from a family of musicians and initially directed towards philosophy by Kant himself. What is interesting about him, here, is a trip to Italy in 1783 where he discovered Palestrina and brought his masses to Germany. With reference to Bach's renaissance, the most famous and important among romantic renaissances, it is necessary to always bear in mind this lively cultural background and the religious context within which it occurs,¹¹ a context that would not only influence Nietzsche himself but, as said, German romanticism in its entirety.

2. The religious compositions and the Christmas Oratorio

Nietzsche's first experiment of choral music composition dates back to years 1858-59. It was a fragment in four parts, *Es zieht ein stiller Engel*; there follows an attempt of motet on the melody *Jesu meine Zuversicht* and a further draft entitled *Aus der Tiefe rufe ich*. More refined, on the contrary, was the *Miserere*, an a cappella vocal quintet dated 4 July 1860.

The attention to the forms of religious music finds its climax in the project and drafts for a *Mass*. A broad program of compositions occupied the young Nietzsche for several months, probably from December

1859 to July 1860. The current version of the fragments of the *Mass*, as affirmed by Janz himself who edited it, is an assumption based on the references that gradually emerge from the diary and letters; its drafting, in fact, apart from being controversial, also lacks a unique and organic work plan. It consists of 23 pieces among solo, choral and orchestral moments. After a long introduction for orchestra, the chorus performs a hint of *Kyrie*, later repeated with a varied theme as well. Then comes the *Gloria* and other fragments for orchestra: an *Ouverture* for orchestra with an intentional entrance of the chorus, the uncompleted *Agnus Dei*, again a fragment of *Kyrie*, a short instrumental episode at the piano and the only completed piece of the *Mass*, the *Requiem*. As solo quartet, the *Lacrimosa* closes the performance, although without the two male voices. The Christmas Oratorio is, on the other hand, more complete and interesting. Devised during the summer of 1860, Nietzsche wrote the first two parts between August and October.¹² Christmas is the topic and Haydn's oratorios are the model. We are still, at least in the intentions, in the centre of a world that, despite many more or less critical phases, stands on the tracks of family and religious tradition. When Nietzsche starts to compose his Oratorio, he is confident that "in its genre the Oratorio holds a higher place than the opera". The oratorio has "a magnificent simplicity, and it should be so in fact, as music that elevates the spirit and elevates it precisely in a strictly religious sense".¹³

From the letters of this period it is clear

¹⁰ Cfr. W. Serauky, *Musikgeschichte der Stadt Halle*, Max Niemeyer, Halle 1942.

¹¹ It was Zelter to create the prerequisites along with Mendelssohn, of the Bach Renaissance. They were also assisted by Adolf Marx, a music critic, editor of the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*. The *Passion according to Matthew* was executed by Mendelssohn (11 and 21 March 1829), who had already known the score since 1823, thanks to his grandmother who used to collect Bach's manuscripts.

¹² The first part, according to Janz reconstruction, is *Einleitung und Chor "Hüter ist die Nacht bald hin"*. "It starts with nostalgic, obscure and mysterious sonority at the piano, that in the absence of a real narrator (the *historicus*), connects the different vocal parts of the Oratorio, evoking, commenting and symbolizing the events that take place in it", M. Berrini, *The Weihnachtsoratorium by Friedrich Nietzsche*, in "Civiltà musicale" (2000), 41, XV, p. 108; the second is composed by *Hirtenchor, Sternerwartung, Gesang des Mohren, Instrumentalstück*.

¹³ F. Nietzsche, *Letters*, n. 203, pp. 136-139 (letter of 14 January 1861).

that J. S. Bach's *Weihnachtoratorium* is not among Nietzsche's early inspirational models. In fact, Gustav Krug, a musician friend, recommends the renowned Bach's piece of music to Nietzsche in a letter of the end of November 1860, after he listened to it during a concert in Leipzig. Krug actually suggested he draw inspiration from Bach for the score, whose choice should have been not a small problem. Moreover, it was bound to be so, since the oratorio is open and narratively structured, without the liturgical obligations of the mass. On 3 December 1860, he asked his mother for the *Song of Songs* as gift for Christmas, "where all the songs are collected with their original form" and he emphasizes: "furthermore I absolutely need it also for another reason, I can't reveal you now";¹⁴ between the lines it is possible to understand the above mentioned difficulty regarding the drafting of the composition. The third part composed by *Chorsätze "Gebenedeit" und "Einen Propheten"* dates back to December.

Between January and March 1861 some relevant events occur, crucial if read in the light of his following biography. As seen, religious music for Nietzsche is not mere accompaniment to the score, and its development definitely sets it apart from the opera, which on the contrary follows the inverse path. Especially to safeguard the narrative unity, the Oratorio did not have to be fragmented in small parts, as happens with the arias in the opera: "I am confident that the entire work should be divided in few parts, although longer, linked to the course of the events and with an absolutely united character".¹⁵ This unity, linguistic simplicity and intelligibility, more programmatic than actually developed by Nietzsche in his Oratorio, form part of a religious aesthetic that recalls Palestrina and evokes the stylistic and formal

perfection of sixteenth-century Catholic polyphony. Nietzsche considers them as an absolute sonorous mirror of a divine thought beyond every confession.

However, something was changing in the existence of this tormented young man. A certain anxiety arose during the Easter holidays (March 1861). Some argument with his mother were likely to happen if he writes: "I also have the impression that Easter holidays, usually so beautiful, have been ruined and overshadowed by those unpleasant incidents and, every time I think about it, I deeply suffer for making you so sad."¹⁶ He continues, though without much conviction, to compose parts of the Oratorio, more and more disconnected. A *Mariae Verkündigung* he resumed and edited many times, in several versions, one of which with a final fugue, kept him busy between January and May 1861.

Other signs of an interest that starts to grow out of the German religious world can be seen in a work that dates back to 24 March of that year, entitled *Die Kinderheit der Völker*, and, about a month later, the translation of *Sechs serbische Volkslieder*. Shortly after, he would abandon the Oratorio to dedicate himself completely to a vast project of a symphonic poem on the sequence of events, mythical more than historical, of the saga of Ermanaric, the Goth king and hero who would rather kill himself than succumb to Attila, and on the music model of the *Hungaria* by the same Listz he had banned from music a few years before. Hence, a sudden entry in the pagan and barbaric world of the German Middle Ages, and an almost complete change of music tastes that takes Nietzsche from the renaissance polyphony to the obscure symbolic forest of romanticism.

Indeed, something really had happened: Nietzsche had listened to Wagner's music for the first time. A listening to the *Tristan*

¹⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Letters*, n. 197, pp. 132-133 (letter of 3 December 1860).

¹⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Letters*, n. 203, pp. 136-139 (letter of 14 January 1861).

¹⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Letters*, n. 230, pp. 153-154 (letter of April 1861).

and *Iseult* piano reduction dates back to March of that year, a work that would immediately project him in another cultural background, thus separating his music and religious experiences forever. From this moment on the religious music gives way to romantic compositions, and his spiritual world would change forever; but this is a chapter of a very different story. To conclude this essay it is possible to quote an extract from *Ecce homo* of 1888, 27 years later, when he writes: “the moment when a transcription for piano of the *Tristan* appeared – congratulations, Mr Bülow! – I became an admirer of Wagner”.¹⁷

¹⁷ F. Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*, Adelphi, Milan 1994, p. 46.