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From Wagner to Metal Through Nietzsche: Dramatic Representation of Metal Music as Ritual, Sacrifice and Catharsis



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Abstract

The combined use of metal music, Wagner, and Nietzsche in the same context is rarely seen. Metal, as a modern musical style and subcultural movement, resonates with protest and musical distortion, while Wagner's name is associated with opera and classical music, which are regarded as the highest and most harmonious art forms of the 19th century. Although each genre has developed its own distinct musical features, closer examination reveals striking parallels between classical and metal music. Scholars from various fields and perspectives have explored this similarity (Middleton, 1990; Walser, 1992; Lilja, 2009; St-Laurent, 2012; Popoff, 2015; Heritage, 2016; Mynett, 2019; Herbst, 2020; Miguel, 2025). In this article, I argue that both metal music and Wagnerian opera share a common origin: early Greek tragedy. The musical intensity, theatricality, and transgressive structure of ancient Greek drama provide both genres with a rich heritage that fosters authenticity, aesthetic fusion, and cultural vitality. Furthermore, the study discusses how German philosopher F. Nietzsche's critique of the concepts of Dionysus and Apollo, as presented in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), serves as a vital reference point and unifying principle behind the coexistence of metal and opera. Thus, this article aims to explore the interaction between metal music and Wagnerian opera through the lens of a ritual-sacrifice-catharsis trilogy, paying homage to the dithyrambic practices of early antiquity, analyzed from a Nietzschean perspective.

Keywords

Metal Music · Wagner · Opera · Nietzsche · Dionysian and Apollonian



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From Wagner to Metal Through Nietzsche: Dramatic Representation of Metal Music as Ritual, Sacrifice and Catharsis

Regarding the common perspective outside metal music studies, it may seem unusual to compare metal and classical music; however, many musicians, fans, and critics of metal have recognized and explored this comparison from different perspectives over time (Middleton, 1990; Walser, 1992; Lilja, 2009; St-Laurent, 2012; Popoff, 2015; Heritage, 2016; Mynett, 2019; Herbst, 2020; Miguel, 2025). Walser (2014) highlights that the strong ties between both types of music are formed, not necessarily because of referencing serious, high-art forms, but due to the need to emphasize ways in which one musical genre can go beyond its accepted category to challenge dominant norms in the music industry. In his discussion on the intersection of metal and classical music, Walser points out the risk of favoring one genre over the other and prefers to use the term “discursive fusion” to describe metal’s appropriation and adaptation of classical music (2014, xxiv; 1992, p. 300). Considering the importance of reflexivity in studying the relationships among different experiences and genres, he draws from the terminology of cultural anthropologists Marcus & Fisher (1986), who advocate for “defamiliarization by cross-cultural juxtaposition,” enabling viewers to step back and view two music genres in a new way, freeing them from the rigid categories they belong to. Weinstein (2016) builds on this approach, describing metal as transcultural rather than cross-cultural. Similarly, Kahn-Harris, considering the nature of metal music, describes it as a “transgressive practice” (2006, p. 30), referring to its breaking of musical and non-musical boundaries in an effort to negate itself or musical canons in general. According to Guibert and Hein (qtd. in Guibert & Guibert, 2016), metal comprises many genres and subgenres. Additionally, LeVine (2008), Wallach, Berger, Greene (2011), Hecker (2012), and Varas-Diaz (2021) emphasize that metal culture has recently become a global phenomenon, blending Western metal parameters with local elements in regional contexts.

In relation to the abundant scholarly effort in showcasing metal’s transcultural roots, there has also been an academic endeavor to emphasize the strong ties and similarities between classical music and metal. For instance, Heritage (2016) argues that heavy metal bears the hallmarks of Western High Art music. Beginning with the late 1960s, he claims that “rock bands have fused the timbres of heavy guitars, drums, and basses, with pseudo-operatic singing styles, orchestral arrangements, and virtuosic performance practices” (p.1). More specifically, Lilja (2009) asserts that apart from the blues and rock, from which heavy metal stems, metal (chord construction) is tied to musical practices that resemble those of the Renaissance and Baroque eras (p. 210). Classical influences, according to Lilja, “are not anymore quotations or borrowed patterns, rather the classical vocabulary is incorporated into the heavy metal style” (p. 175). Walser (2014) brings metal closer to classical music, claiming that many heavy metal musicians of the 70s and 80s were trained in classical music, borrowing from composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Paganini and Vivaldi in adopting the harmonic progressions of the Baroque Age and reinterpreting musical compositions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Likewise, Mynett (2019) argues, “classical and particularly Baroque influences regularly continue to be appropriated, assimilated and adapted to contemporary metal music” (p. 307). Middleton (1990) underlines that “there is a relatively high syntactic correlation between rock and Baroque music, noting that both use conventional harmonic progressions, melodic patterns and structural frameworks as the basis for musical composition” (qtd. in Heritage, 2016, p.50). Herbst (2020), in a more specific study on metal, argues that German metal bands relate themselves to their national heritage of classical and romantic composers like Beethoven and Wagner (p. 102). Herbst indicates that Wagner has inspired many bands from Germany and abroad in terms of sound, structure, and precision, including the rock band Queen:

“[...] There is an air of déjà vu about the pin sharp, astronomical vocal harmonies, the classical influences (Brahms, Chopin, Wagner), the absolute delectation of genuinely hummable tunes all encased in dynamic rock chord changes and amplified, acceptable violence that brings home the early days of Freddy Mercury’s Magnificents. [...]” (Dome qtd. in Herbst, p. 97)

The appropriation of classical compositions and operatic qualities are frequently witnessed in a wide selection of metal bands such as the Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, AC/DC, Kiss, Alice Cooper, and more recently in Dream Theatre, Rammstein, Apocalyptica, Accept, Gojira, Bathory, Rhapsody of Fire, Therion, etc. Additionally, famous guitarist and composer Joey DeMaio of the American metal band Manowar states that Wagner has been the father of heavy metal (Jones, para. 17).

Especially discernible in terms of the sonic features of metal music and performances, one can witness how some aspects of metal resonate with the Wagnerian opera as both music genres rely on the intensity of emotion, sonic grandeur and transgressive nature of the chorus displayed in the form of dancing and singing as the unique characteristics of the early Greek theatre. In that sense, the use of amplified electric guitar sounds, the form of down tuning, the long, distorted, and broken “arpeggiated” riffs¹ of metal may stand similar to that of the non-stopping flow of polyphonic pitches, dark and metallic timbre of the Wagnerian tuba² in the polychromatic orchestra of Wagner. Miguel (2025, online talk) claims that adding more instruments, specifically brass, to a symphonic orchestra, might resemble the overall goal of mightiness and power when adding distortion to a guitar. According to Mynett (2019), “down tuning provides a deeper and heavier timbre” (p. 307), which may resonate with the dark and metallic timbre of the Wagnerian tuba. Black Sabbath drummer Bill Ward considers the darkness of Wagner to be very appealing, due to the use of “monster-like chords that would evoke so much to imagination” (Popoff, 2015). St-Laurent (2012) argues that “the power and excess that characterize Wagner’s music can be attributed both to the constant fusion of voices and timbres and to the vast scale of the orchestra” (para. 13). Moreover, particularly visible in the style of production known as “the wall of sound,” developed by the American record producer Phil Spector in the 1960s, “a Wagnerian approach to rock and roll” (Williams, 2003) was established, underlining the use of multiple orchestral instruments for pushing up harmony to their absolute limits for creating a heavy aesthetic of sonic density and distortion (Herbst, 2022, p. 92), which resembles the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Wagner³.

The similarities are not limited to sonic features, though. Metal music and performances parallel Wagnerian aesthetics of epic theatricality as both music genres stem from the same source of the early Greek tragedy, which renders the workings of Dionysian and Apollonian elements to evoke emotional tension full of conflict and primal instincts. For instance, Barnett (2017) discusses Black Sabbath’s pioneering role in containing the basic elements of Greek tragedy that enable the flourishing of tragic structure and cathartic potential in heavy metal narratives. Other than tragic plot and catharsis effect, the spectacle as an essential part of the early Greek theatre is revitalized by many bands among which one can see the theatricality of Kiss and Alice Cooper having a pioneering role to be emulated by future examples such as Rammstein, Marilyn Manson, Bathory, Gojira, and Rhapsody of Fire. These bands stressed visual spectacle as a part of their musical performance, featuring costumes, makeup, fog machines, smoking guitars, fire breathing, blood spitting and light shows (Wiederhorn & Turman, 2013). The overall concept of metal performance with

¹A riff is a repeated pattern or melody that forms the basis of a musical composition, usually played by rhythm section instruments or a solo instrument. In classical music, a riff may be more accurately named a motive (or motif), which sometimes behaves as an ostinato (a repeated melodic or harmonic pattern). Arpeggiated riff is a broken chord progression. Please see Herbst and Mynett (2022) and Lilja (2009) for more information.

²The instrument, a four-valve brass, is introduced to orchestra by Richard Wagner. Please see Jepson, B. (2013).

³Wagner’s idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* mainly revolves around the purpose of achieving a total combination of art, architecture, poetry, drama, and music in opera. The concept will be handled in detail in the coming section of this article.

the phantasmagoric iconography of the stage and the mesmerizing portrayal of the singer as tragic hero, remind Wagnerian musical dramas, that take after the early forms of Greek tragedy which revolves around the ritualistic sacrifice of the satyr (rock star) in front of spectators (audience) through the spectacle (stage-props) and chorus (music and dance), leading to catharsis (communal pathos) at the end. Taking all these similarities into account, the dialectic of Apollonian and Dionysian forces as theorized by R. W. Nietzsche in his *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*⁴ (1872) will be grounded in order to provide a solid ground for the theoretical frame of the article.

In the scope of this paper, metal's appropriation of classical music, however, does not necessarily mean "metaling of classical music." The aim is not to exemplify metal's re-interpretation of classical music or metal covers of classical compositions. It is more than that: The major focus is on the structure of both music genres and how metal comes closer to Wagnerian opera in terms of sonic, performative, and discursive aspects as both genres derive from the same source: Early Greek theatre of dithyrambs⁵. As someone who modestly follows classical music and heavy metal simultaneously, this article, hence, is born out of my curiosity to analyze and exemplify the intersection between two different music genres. Accordingly, this article begins with historical information regarding the backgrounds of metal music and Wagnerian opera. The second part forms the philosophical background whereupon Nietzschean concepts are grounded to provide the next section with a solid platform to exemplify the workings of Dionysian and Apollonian forces in the frame of metal and Wagnerian musical drama. Overall, this article argues that metal, paying homage to the trilogy of ritual-sacrifice-catharsis reminiscent of the dithyrambic practices in early Antiquity, portrays "discursive fusion" between two music genres and thus allows listeners and readers a new, transgressive act of perception.

The Historical Background: The Birth of Metal and the Gift of Wagner

Lilja (2009) argues that "heavy metal was formed against the cultural background of the 1960s. Many of the themes significant to the decade were equally important to heavy metal. It was not only musical themes, but archetypical ideologies, aesthetics, and lifestyle ideals that were already present in one form or another" (p. 24). Metal music was born from the blues and rock and roll of the 1950s, but adopting new features such as distorted guitar riffs, screaming vocals and strong bass drums, it quickly became a loud and aggressive medium of escape and social protest for the British working-class of the 1970s (Berger qtd. in Walser, 2014, p. 8; Weinstein, 1991, p. 11). According to Kahn-Harris (2006), metal experienced a long journey from the blues to its present examples:

"Heavy metal was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s by bands such as Black Sabbath, Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin. But it was in the 1980s that heavy metal reached the apex of its popularity. Whereas the bands that emerged in the 1970s often had roots in rhythm and blues, from the late 1970s there emerged a generation of bands that took their primary inspiration from metal itself. The so-called 'new wave of British Heavy Metal', led by bands such as Saxon, Def Leppard and Iron Maiden in the early 1980s, contributed enormously to the distinctiveness of Metal. This moment of coalescence in the early 1980s, in which many of the most identifiable aspects of heavy metal came together, was also the moment that began the process of the fragmentation of metal that was to reach its apotheosis in the late 1990s (p.2)."

⁴The book, originally entitled as *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, was first published in January 1872 in Leipzig, under the title of, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. Later on, the title was changed to *The Birth of Tragedy, or Hellenism and Pessimism*.

⁵The word *Dithyrambos* is a ritualistic hymn and dance, performed in honor of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility and it forms the origin of the early Greek theatre. The word will be explained in relation with the early Greek drama as a practice of ritual-sacrifice-catharsis in the coming sections of this article.

The first metal band, Black Sabbath was created in Birmingham, UK with an attempt to express the hard reality of life through music or, ironically, to reflect the deafening sounds of machine, steel and chain coming from the factories located in the industrial suburb of Birmingham into their music (Paksoylu, 2024). Although the first use of heavy metal was generally agreed to be in Steppenwolf's famous song, "Born to be Wild" (1968) featuring in the road movie, *Easy Rider* (1969), it was used earlier in W.S. Burroughs' novel, *Naked Lunch* (1962), and later on in *Nova Express* (1964) to refer a junkie's fantasies and confessions (Berger qtd. in Walser, 2014, p. 8; Weinstein, 1991, p. 19; Lilja, 2009, p. 21). Apart from its musical and cultural appearances, the academic use of metal was given credit in the early 1990s thanks to the publication of monographs by Weinstein (1991) and Walser (1992). Since then, the metal canon has grown into an academic discipline with the contributions of many scholars specialized in diverse fields, leading to the founding of the ISMMS in the 2010s and the establishment of the Metal Music Studies Journal published by Intellect since 2015.

Metal, on its long journey from blues and rock to hard rock, heavy metal, and extreme metal (Krause, 2015, p. 4; Popoff, 2015) has adopted new forms, gone through sonic and performative transgressions, experienced a discursive fusion, and has been evolving in our day. It is also possible to notice the *classical* part that has stayed dormant in metal music, depending on the intentional preferences and musical characteristics of bands and musicians. As Walser (2014) claims, "heavy metal, like all forms of rock and soul, owes its biggest debt to African American blues, but classical music has always been the central source they feed on for harmonic, melodic and analytic structure for studying the new modes of musical pedagogy" (pp. 57-58). Although it is not relevant for all musicians in the metal scene, quite a few number of them such as Ritchie Blackmore (founding member and lead guitarist of the famous bands, Deep Purple and Rainbow), Eddie Van Halen (guitar virtuoso of the band, Van Halen) and Yngwie Malmsteen (guitar virtuoso) exemplified the fusion of metal with classical music not only in terms of musical style and practice but also in terms of complexity and elitism that shaped musical virtuosity. For instance, "the classically trained organist Jon Lord of Deep Purple used to pluck a *classical* thing out and turn it around in the same way Ritchie Blackmore was turning around Hendrix riffs and make that his own" (Lilja, 2009, p. 153). Moreover, Walser argues that the famous rock song "Highway Star" (1972) by Deep Purple follows a Baroque stylistic composition, that begins over a descending bass line, reminiscent of the bass patterns favored by 17th-century composers with a set of classical features such as repetitive melodic patterns, square phrase structures, virtuosic solos, and harmonic progressions (pp.54-65). In Ozzy Osbourne's "Mr. Crowley" (composed by Rhoads), "a Baroque-like sequence is used in the introduction" (Lilja, 2009, p. 177). Likewise, Heritage (2016) exemplifies Manowar's "The Crown and the Ring (Lament of the Kings)" as an example of a neo-classical '80s heavy metal song with a rich, Western High Art-influenced harmony (p.11). According to St-Laurent (2012), the Swedish metal band Therion has been identified with the composer Richard Wagner "for including symphony orchestras and lyrical singers in their compositions, to the point of it being called 'Wagnerian' by the sociologist Fabien Hein" (para. 1).

As it is exemplified above, metal musicians, either due to individual preferences or musical upbringing, re-interpreted the musical discourses of the Western High Art forms, mainly of Bach, Vivaldi, Handel, and Wagner, and projected different types of fusion upon contemporary works of metal.

Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* served as an influential foundation for metal musicians in developing progressive forms of metal across sonic, lyrical, and performative aspects. Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was a German composer and theater director known for his exceptionally long operas called music dramas or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which combines art, architecture, poetry, drama, and music (Wolfman, 2013; Rogers, 2023; Ulger, 2014; Filimowicz, 2024; Berry, 2004). Wagner's talent lay in his ability to independently control each musical and theatrical element before combining them into a powerful total work of art. Famous for *Tannhäuser* (1845), *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), and *Parsifal* (1882), he revolutionized traditional opera by em-

ploying *Versmelodie*, which balances music and drama within a single piece in contrast to earlier composers who prioritized language and singing over music (Wagner, 1913, p. 498). Especially in his later masterpieces, known as *The Ring Cycle* (1876), *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, created over more than 20 years, Wagner produced his greatest work, comprising *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*, representing over 15 hours of music in one continuous performance (Ulger, 2014; Rogers, 2023; Glynatsis, 2020).

Wagner considered the musical performances of his time either artificial or partial, so he tried to construct a seamless work of total art form, both virtually and musically, and expanded the possibilities of theater and stagecraft (Filimowicz, 2024). In other words, he experimented with a new idea of opera akin to cinematographic effect. According to Adorno (1981), who has written extensively on Wagner's politics more than his poetics, the progressive elements in Wagnerian opera include the use of dissonance, the polyphony of his melodies, the nuances of sound and color, rigorous use of form, and the enigmatic connection between tradition and innovation in his music (Bauer, 2005, p. 70). These pioneering techniques are meticulously handled in the collection of theoretical essays, *Oper und Drama* (1851) by Wagner, himself: Firstly, the writing of *Librettos* (poetic and dramatic content for the performance) by the composer; secondly, the use of *Leitmotifs* (recurring musical themes related to a set of characters, ideas or emotions, repetitive in each section adding emotional intensity and narrative depth to his operas); thirdly, the expansion of orchestration (with the inclusion of different instruments such as the "Wagner tuba," a four-valve brass that adds a metallic and smoky sound to the orchestration); and lastly, the extension of the musical landscape (by lowering the orchestra pit under stage level as we can see in current opera houses today), Wagner founded the aesthetic principles of novelty guiding opera and drama. (Wagner, 1913; Jones, np.; Jepson, 2013; Glynatsis, 2020; Rogers, 2023; Filimowicz, 2024).

With the revolutionary techniques of dramaturgical and scenographic approaches in mind, Wagner built his own opera house, *Bayreuth Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, Germany in 1875 and announced the start of *The Bayreuth Opera Festival* only to present the Wagner repertoire in the Wagnerian version, that would be reminiscent of the dithyrambic plays of the early Antiquity, strong in emotion, passionate in tone, effective in sound, minimizing the alienation effect, *Verfremdungseffekt*, between the audience and the composer, and making the spectator a part of the performance, itself (Bauer, 2005). In Nietzsche's words, "the first thing his art presents us with is a magnifying glass: you look through it and you do not believe your eyes—everything looks big; even Wagner looks big" (2008, p. 22). To this end, Wagner has always been celebrated and remembered for his success in establishing an excessively modern-day artwork that considers opera truly as a phantasmagoric performance designed in a symphonic manner. To sum up, like the ideal art form of Greek tragedies that consist of the Aristotelian principles of plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and music, Wagnerian operas are both dithyrambic in theory and practice, and something more than that. They are the synthesis of metaphysical idealism, Greek tragedy, Dionysian chorus, Schopenhauerian will, and Nietzschean pessimism (Wolfman, 2013), all of which will be scrutinized in the next section.

The Philosophical Background: Apollonian and Dionysian Forces in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)

F. W. Nietzsche in his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music or Hellenism and Pessimism* (1872), talks about the origin of ancient Greek theatre as the major art form dominant in the Western world, and he questions the existence, disappearance and possible re-emergence of tragedy through new art forms, particularly via Wagnerian opera in the 19th-century German culture. He argues that European culture requires an aesthetic revival because the civilized Western man has long cut his ties with his primitive nature contributing to cultural and artistic decadence, which can only be overcome by

modern man's recognition of the contradictory forces of light/appearance, vs. darkness/drunkenness, *Shein* vs. *Erscheinung*, in nature and in one's true being (Nietzsche, 1910, p. 22).

As clarified by Joseph Vincenzo in his lecture on *Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy* (2022), Nietzsche develops his ideas from the Greek tragedy, mainly deriving from the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles whilst distancing from Euripides, all of whom form the fundamental trio of Ancient Greek drama, born from the tension between optimism and pessimism, in other words, between dreams and intoxication prevalent in nature. In order to talk about the origin of these two cognitive states, Nietzsche relies on two Hellenic deities in Greek mythology: Dionysus and Apollo. The Dionysian, named after Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, fertility, festivity and vegetation underlines compulsive and transgressive drives towards death, destruction, rapture and chaos whereas the Apollonian, named after Apollo, the Greek god of sun, life, logic, harmony, music and arts, represents order, discipline, beauty and the affirmation of life:

"The word 'Apollonian' stands for that state of repose in the presence of a visionary world, in the presence of the world of the beautiful appearance designed as a deliverance from becoming; the word Dionysus, on the other hand, stands for strenuous becoming, grown self-conscious form of the rampant voluptuousness of the creator, who is also perfectly conscious of the violent anger of the destroyer" (Nietzsche, 1910, p. xix)

On the Apollonian side, one can see how the principle of individuation, *principium individuationis* (p. 25) operates as a generally regarded manifesto of "knowing thyself" (p. 41) that affirms life, creation, and the individual will, which is juxtaposed with "forgetting oneself", manifested by the Dionysian chaos and excess that underlines an escape from self or, negation of self to surrender to primordial unity. This opposition is further projected upon the aesthetics of early Greek culture in terms of Dorian vs Phrygian norms⁶; the former representing measure and restraint, mostly visible in Greek architecture and plastic arts, whereas the latter represents passion and ecstasy, mostly visible in music and poetry.

Nietzsche and early Greeks believed that tragedy as the main art form of early antiquity was formed out of the clash between these opposing forces (p. xxi) which determined the dominant aesthetics of the age, first emerging in the form of dithyrambs, played by Thespis during the festivals held in honor of the fertility and festivity god, Dionysus in the city of Greater Dionysia, Athens around 400 BC. Nietzsche argues that these festivals, evolving into different forms such as tragedy, comedy, and satiric play, have been the driving force behind Western classical theatre for a long time (pp. 60, 70). The dichotomy between the Apollonian and Dionysian spirits is further projected into the arts as the optimistic side is dominated by rational forces, appearances, and beauty in art, whereas the horrible, terrible, and chaotic character of existence shapes the pessimistic side. According to the Apollonian view, all art is dream work, relying on good form, beauty, order, and self-consciousness, whereas all art is viewed as chaotic and chthonic, maintaining the sublime overflow of both destructive and regenerative forces in Dionysian nature. However, it is necessary to notice that Nietzsche, throughout his discussion, hesitates to privilege one drive/state over the other. On the contrary, he emphasizes counterbalancing two forces to achieve a redeeming vision in life and art, which is only possible first by acknowledging the Apollonian spirit and then surrendering to the Dionysian one that resides in music, especially in the music of ancient tragedy: the tragic chorus (pp. 56-57, 167).

According to Nietzsche, music, whether in the form of a Greek chorus or classical opera, is a crucial component of the tragic art form, liberating human beings from rigid life structures and drawing the wild

⁶The Dorians, along with the Phrygians, Aeolians, Achaeans and Ionians, were one of the five major ethnic groups of the Classical Greek period (5th-4th century BC), specifically known for their dialect, architectural and aesthetic forms, associated with simple, strong and solid structures whereas Phrygians of the early Greek colonies in Anatolia (8th century BC- AD 5th century) were associated with aesthetic transgression mostly visible in music and poetry.

passions of nature closer to them. In that sense, whether it is a headbanger's ball⁷, a ritual dance, a festival, or an opera, music provides the guiding sense to connect humanity with the "primordial unity" on the road to catharsis. This new becoming, this rebirth, the sublime realization of suffering and truth is what Nietzsche means by primordial unity. In a Schopenhauerian line of thinking, music is the annihilation of the individual will and surrender into an immortal will, which is represented by the tragic chorus (p. 123). It is only through this tragic chorus that the true meaning of the dramatic play is revealed, so that the individual is dissolved into the collective. Nietzsche argues that this tendency is further interrupted by the stylistic interventions of Euripides and the involvement of Socratic argumentations, so Western culture went more in the line of Apollo rather than Dionysus, eventually leading to aesthetic and cultural decay in the Western world. At this point, Nietzsche returns to Wagnerian aesthetics to escape from the cultural decadence he is witnessing in the European world, and he tries to find solace in Wagnerian opera as the modern form of Greek tragedy, revisited by Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

It is clear that Nietzsche was under the influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner when he started writing his work due to his intellectual heritage and strong friendship with the Wagner family (pp. 122-123) -although he, later on, distanced himself from the Wagnerian circle due to sensationalist claims for Wagner's interest in anti-Semitism and social-nationalism (Nietzsche, 2008, p. 44; Adorno, 1981; Berry, 2004, p. 664). However, Wagnerian influence upon Nietzsche is visible in many ways as Wagner emphasized at the core of his music dramas, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that the fusion of multiple aesthetic forms such as drama, opera, music and poetry ought to be organized and portrayed at the excess of human emotion, parallel to that of a Dionysian transgression (Nietzsche, 2008, p. 64). On the other hand, the Schopenhauerian heritage is most evident in Nietzsche's meditation on "de-individuation" through the negation of the individual will to surrender to a higher authority, the primordial unity during the collective act of Dionysian intoxication. As argued above, both influences upon Nietzsche provided him with the means for formulating his principles of the Dionysian and Apollonian, echoing the dithyrambic practice of ritual-sacrifice-catharsis in early Greek theatre.

The Discursive Fusion between Metal and Wagner's Musical Drama through Nietzschean Meta-text

As the theatre of ancient Athens offered Wagner a typical model for the ideal relationship between theatre and the public (Borchmeyer, 1991), he revisited many of the principles of the early Greek theatre as theorized in Aristotle's *Poetics* in terms of plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle. In this section, these principles will be categorized under four sub-titles, such as content (*plot* in Greek theater), music (*sound and chorus* in Greek theatre), the spectacle and audience all of which overlap with the sonic and discursive patterns of Wagner's opera and metal music that underline the dialectic of Apollonian and Dionysian dimensions as theorized in Nietzsche's work.

To begin with content, early Greek tragedy mainly revolves around the workings of fate enacted upon mankind who is torn between the dialectic of good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, resistance and consent, reason and chaos, which points to the transgressive nature of humanity, as exemplified in *Oedipus Rex*, *Bacchae*, *Antigone*, *Orestes*, *Medea*, etc. Likewise, Wagner's musical dramas, -explicitly visible in *Tristan and Isolde*- focus on themes related to the binary opposition between life and death, love and hate, war and peace, fate and free-will. Similar to Wagner's musical dramas that represent the tragic suffering of mankind torn by (self) destructive forces in the universe, metal portrays the vulnerability, entrapment and estrangement of man in life, which in turn may lead him into violence, struggle, disorder and rebellion, reminding the fall of a tragic hero, particularly known as *hamartia*. The reaction of the individual towards

⁷Headbanger is a term identified with metal fans and performers who bang their heads while producing or listening to metal music.

such a downfall is Dionysian, sublimating it into pleasure through textual play and thus vindicating the power of art (Weinstein, 1991, p. 42). Besides the themes of tragic suffering and entrapment of man, the use of romantic ideology and nostalgia for the past emerges as a common element both in Wagner's *Ring Cycle* and mainly in progressive, folk, black metal examples as an emblem of ideological resistance against mainstream parameters.

Moreover, especially in terms of (Norse and Germanic) mythology and fantasy, it is possible to see how themes in Wagner's *Ring Cycle* –mainly in *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhine Gold*)- resonate with the content of some metal songs that rely on Celtic folklore, mythological tales, fantastic motifs and occult noticed in the lyrical context of Iron Maiden, Manowar, Amon Amarth, Enslaved, Bathory, etc. Besides borrowing from similar sources, metal bands such as Metallica, Judas Priest, Rammstein and Blind Guardian have incorporated Wagnerian elements into their lyrics or musical structure such as the use of *Ride of the Valkyries* (Wagner, 1845) in Metallica song "The Ecstasy of Gold" (1992) and the metal band, Blind Guardian's album *The Night at the Opera* (2002) is inspired by Wagnerian themes and characters (Jones, np.; Encyclopedia Metallum, 2024). Apocalyptica's *Wagner Reloaded* album (2013) and performance with the same name, organized in celebration of the 200th anniversary of Wagner's birth, is an example of original classical composition by the metal band, channeling the virtuosity and spirit of Wagner in terms of the use of cinematographic atmosphere, emotional intensity and heroic display of orchestra.

The second point of interaction between Wagner and metal revolves around music –or chorus- which forms the essential part of early Greek theatre. The chorus (both in terms of singing and dancing) acts as the main actor rather than a background element in Aristotelian theatre. The presence of the chorus provides dramatic and emotional integrity, present in layered musicality that reinforces a tragic tone, which is rooted in the Dionysian rituals of dithyrambs. In this line of thinking, the Dionysian characteristic prevalent in metal and Wagnerian musical drama emphasizes excess in tone, contradiction in rhythm, and distortion of chords on a sonic level. Wagnerian opera highlights the use of powerful melodies recited by a variety of instruments and deep harmonic structures with complex and effective intonations. The use of *Leitmotifs* –through sound or image- is further developed by Wagner, who considers the recurrent function of those motifs as a significant part of the artwork to cause a dramatic effect. Such recurrent motifs, besides the melody constructed through repetitive riffs, form the main structure of metal music, which is observed as a part of musical themes.

As it is discussed earlier in this article, Nietzsche interprets "musical dissonance" as Dionysian, underlining excess and transgression on a sonic level (Nietzsche, 1910, p. 183). The Dionysian effect on timbre is revealed in Wagner's music via the inclusion of the Wagner tuba, which challenges the transparency of orchestration. Likewise, in metal, the use of distortion is an essential part of musical dissonance (Herbst and Mynett, 2022). Fernandez-Morales argues that the rejoicing of life through music is a part of metal, whose music is chaotic and loud, which helps us establish that metal as a genre could be considered Dionysian (2015, p. 48). Adding to the use of polyrhythms in metal, this is a sign of the genre's sophistication in articulating conflict, disaster, and protest that would accompany tone. Timbre is another vehicle for technical achievement that underscores musical power in metal (Walser, qtd. in Wallach, Berger, & Greene, 2011, p. 11). The timbre of the electric guitar provides the player with a bottom-heavy, louder, euphoric, and complex tempo for musical effect:

"The electric guitar acquired the capabilities of the premier virtuosic instruments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the power and speed of the organ, the flexibility and nuance of the violin. Technological increases in sustain and volume made possible the conceptual and technical shifts that led (heavy metal) players to explore Baroque models." (Walser, 1992, p. 272)

This is similar to Wagner's use of his favorite chord, known as the "Tristan chord" (Horn, 2024), which allowed him to move away from traditional harmony in a way that would eventually better parallel the dramatic conflict happening on stage.

The Dionysian characteristic of chorus both in metal and Wagnerian musical drama emphasizes the transgressive nature of music; however it is also important to notice that music is not uniquely Dionysian in essence: for music to become a mode of excess, first it has to adopt the language of Apollo, in other words, music shall rest on a coherent, stable and harmonic structure that will provide continuity and stylistic form; only after the break away from that musical structure, there appears the possibility of creating transgressive practices. Music, in other words, is a normative, systematic platform that bestows freedom, rebellion and communal understanding (Ergur, 2024, para. 7). Nietzschean understanding of music (dithyrambic chorus) underlines a similar interpretation of the dialectic between two forces, arguing that before the appearance of Dionysus, Apollonian representation of art was of harmony and relief, providing the audience with delight in form. However, only after the immersion in the Dionysian, early Greeks were able to get lost in the music of ecstasy (pp. 186-187). In that sense, both music genres are based on a normative musical structure where they are free to experiment with new or divergent skills.

Moreover, both music genres take after the "recitative" language of the primitive man, which is the actual reason for balancing language and music during the show. In Wagnerian artwork, aria singing, recitation, and performance of music are equally organized in terms of *Versmelodie*, never failing to privilege one form over the other (Wagner, 1913, p. 498). Wagner's genius lies in his awareness to recognize that music, similar to a dithyrambic chorus, is not representational but presentational, so it shall not be secondary to the language. In other words, the chorus does not *imitate* man and his actions; on the contrary, it *presents* them. The equilibrium of recitation and music performance is further enhanced in Wagner by leveling the orchestra pit beneath the surface for the extension of the stage, providing theatricality and musical composition a separate place to increase coherence, devotion, and concentration. Likewise, in metal compositions, it is observed that the act of performing music, singing, and theatricality are complementary to one another. Metal performances are more than mere representations where musicians produce music on a stage that is allocated evenly to underscore the strength of each instrument and performer. In terms of metal performances, to bring music performance closer to theatricality, some bands have produced mind-blowing theatrics with their unique shows among whom we can name Alice Cooper's *Killer/I Love the Dead Guillotine Row*, (Rock n Metal, 2011); and more recently French metal band Gojira's Olympics Opening performance in France, 2024 has unleashed both a sonic and performative revolution. The German metal band Rammstein's *Mein Teil* performance (Rammstein Live, 2013) is another example of the balancing of theatricality and music on stage.

Another common feature at the intersection of metal and Wagnerian musical drama is the idea of the spectacle, in other words, the dramatic performance as a whole. Spectacle, as a component of tragedy identified in Aristotle's *Poetics*, is provided as an essential factor in amplifying emotion and thus increasing the catharsis effect. Spectacle in early Greek tragedy consists of costumes, masks, stage props, and scenic effects. Although Aristotle considered spectacle as the least important element among others, it has vitality in terms of Wagnerian opera and metal performances because it intensifies emotion, theatricality, and music. Planning and organization form a necessary part of the spectacle. In terms of Wagnerian artwork, the tension is kept alive throughout the show through the organization of every single detail beforehand. All these details are written earlier by Wagner himself in the form of *librettos*, similar to the *directionary* of some metal performances, where all compositional, technical, and musical devices are organized long before the performance is made, indicating metal is not based on a simple group activity that talks about resistance only. To give an example from the metal scene, the choreography of Rammstein stands out, pre-arranging all

parts in advance in terms of pyro-choreography, musical performance, and expressionist theatricality, which altogether form the collective identity of the Rammstein persona to be displayed meticulously on stage.

In Wagner's musical dramas, stage props such as decor and lighting are designed as parts of the spectacle to be supportive in adding mythological depth to iconography. Once the lights go off down the dark corridor of the starry stage, actors/singers start to illuminate the audience in a mystifying manner. However, this does not mean that the audience stays passive; on the contrary, Wagner emphasizes minimizing the alienation effect between the audience and the play, making the spectators a dynamic part of the show itself (Bauer, 2005). This is similar to the idea of Susan Bennett, who in her remarkable work, *Theatre Audiences* (1997), quotes from Walcot on the idea of spectatorship as a productive and emancipated group:

"The chorus shows that no physical barrier separated the performer from the audience; the presence of a god [Dionysus] among spectators, who might also be active on the stage, further reveals the absence of a physical barrier. Stage, orchestra and auditorium formed a single unit and so too did actors, chorus and spectators, all of whom were sharing in a common act of devotion." (Walcot qtd. in Bennett, 1997, p. 19)

Likewise, decor and lighting in a metal performance are expressions of power, signifying the performer's power, who is idealized on stage (Weinstein, 1991, p. 223). At that point, the singer transforms into a (tragic) hero who mesmerizes the crowd by allowing his *persona* to be sacrificed in the name of uniting with the audience and making the show an ecstatic moment of presentation. The metal music or concert, in that sense, can be compared to the headbangers' ball, the tribal dance of the rock star whose ritualistic sacrifice, by negating his individuality and uniting with the audience, leads to catharsis through communal pathos. This reminds us of the Nietzschean idea of the *satyr* as mentioned in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where the immediate effect of the dithyrambic chorus is emphasized to subvert Apollonian authority and erase the distance among common folk, thus forming the soul of tragedy. According to Nietzsche, this is the ultimate purpose of the tragic play, which underlines the negation of "Principium Individuationis" to reach "Primal Unity" through the "Dionysian will" (1910, p. 187). In other words, once the charismatic metal performer is on stage, mediating between the mundane and sacred worlds, the experience of Dionysian ecstasy (the act of singing and acting) is revealed through the audience in a shamanistic state (Weinstein, 1991, p. 88) and thus, speaks the satyr/rock star: "But now follow me to a tragic play, and sacrifice with me in the temple of both deities!" (Nietzsche, 1910, p. 187).

To give an example for the use of stage-props in articulating the symbolic sacrifice of a rock star's individual will during Dionysian rapture will be referential to the performances of the famous singer, Till Lindeman of the band, Rammstein, whose wild and aggressive show sets the stage literally on fire –as he is famously known for using pyrotechnics on stage where the first rows of the audience, despite the risk of getting burned and injured, enjoys a perfect mixture of terror and bliss. Secondly, thanks to Alice Cooper's (of the band with the same name) magnificent theatricality of evil, accompanied by his legendary facial makeup and costumes, the audience is able to get carried away with a Dionysian frenzy that exhilarates aggression and rapture. Recently, the 2024 Paris Olympics' opening performance by the opera singer Marina Viotti with the metal band Gojira, who won the Grammy Award for Best Metal Performance, can be noted as a Dionysian metal show enacted with fire power and blood confetti, to revisit history in the iconic mansion, La Conciergerie where Marie Antoinette was once prisoned. Although the performative examples given above are all masterfully planned and executed without failing to be chaotic at all, the effect of spectacle upon the audience leads to Dionysian frenzy, evoking rapture and ecstasy.

The audience, as the last feature of fusion between metal and opera, rather than existing as an individual component in the early Greek theatre, functions in relation with the catharsis effect, because Aristotle views the audience as a passive entity, which is an unlikely condition in terms of Wagnerian and metal audiences.

However, it is necessary here to differentiate between the Wagnerian and metal audiences as Wagner's musical dramas were designed especially for a bourgeoisie minority, whereas metal audiences consist more of a mass of people. Despite being few in number compared to mainstream audiences of other genres, metal audiences are remarkably similar to the folk audience attending Dionysian festivals, "indicative of Athenian democracy" (Bennett, 1997, p. 19).

In terms of metal audiences, at the open site of a metal show, the performer engages freely in a symbolic interplay with the audience, giving them extra room for the display of extreme raw and instinctual bodily practices such as head-banging and mosh-dancing on the floor, or stage-diving from the platform onto audience (Riches, 2012, p. 35). The idea of open space -despite being restricted by concert rules- then works in a supportive way in legitimizing excess, ecstasy, and transgression of individual space. After the symbolic sacrifice of the performer has taken place, the audience unites with the singer, diminishing the individual autonomy and stardom of the performer and, thus, allowing "consummation" (Weinstein, 1991, p. 600) in other words, "primordial unity" to come into existence (Nietzsche, 1910, p.170). Such fulfillment is similar to the Dionysian ecstasy or "drunkenness" (1910, p.22) visible during the dithyrambic process of ritual-sacrifice-catharsis.

In the case of Wagner's audience, as emphasized in the concept of his Bayreuth Opera House, which was constructed as the ideological monument of Wagner industry, celebrating machine power, avant-garde techniques and German nationalism in the 19th-century European world (Glynatsis, 2020), the architectural structure of the auditorium was planned in every manner to serve both the Wagnerian artwork and the audience whose alienation effect was targeted to be minimized as the spectacle was made a part of the performance itself (Bauer, 2005). In this manner, it is crucial to consider the phantasmagoric power of the enclosed space and the use of machines in hypnotizing the audience. The effective use of stage-props enhances the power of theatre, however, Walter Benjamin, in his remarkable claims on the idea of bourgeoisie artwork, argues the opposite, claiming that "in the age of mechanical reproduction, the aura of the ritualized art form withers, but this also emancipates the work of art form from its parasitical dependence on ritual and tradition" (1935, p. 6). Although Benjamin's argument rationalizes the legitimization of liberal practices behind artistic productions, this does not mean that artistic genres lose their grip with tradition; on the contrary, in the case of Wagner's opera and metal music, dependence on ritual/artistic tradition, which equals the core of Antiquity, strengthens the authenticity of both genres, at the same time utilizing their means of production, dissemination and consumption in terms of reaching wider audiences. As exemplified in both music genres, audience reception is shaped by the harmonious functioning of each item in the spectacle as much as it is determined by the space that forms it.

To sum up, in terms of the Dionysian and the Apollonian forces, Wagnerian musical drama and metal music overlap regarding content, music, spectacle, and audience as the necessary parts of ancient Greek theatre. Beginning with content (synonymous with *plot* in Greek theatre), it is observed that both genres make use of similar or identical sources to recite the fragile nature of humanity in the face of larger forces enacted upon man. Wagner's epic cycle of *Der Ring* handles love, death, fate, and anger in as much as passionate a manner as the metal content. Moreover, the use of mythology and fantasy prevails as a common reference point upon which the two music genres rely. Especially visible in the mythic storytelling of Iron Maiden, Manowar, Blind Guardian, Bathory, Katatonia, Amon Amarth, Therion, and Enslaved, one can notice thematic parallelism in lyrics. Music (*chorus and sound*) is another sub-title where metal and Wagnerian musical drama meet. Here, music is analyzed in terms of its sonic structure and the function of the tragic chorus. Although classical music and metal rely on different musical peculiarities, it is common to find repetitive sounds and patterns shared by both genres, such as the Dionysian characteristic of music, which highlights excess in tone, contradiction in rhythm and distortion of chords on a sonic level. Concerning

the chorus, the Dionysian features are visible in both music genres as much as they are dependent on a normative musical structure, where they are free to experiment with new or divergent skills. Another point of intersection is the idea of the spectacle, which forms the core of both genres, uniting drama, music, poetry, costume, decor, lighting, and dance. The Wagnerian idea of artwork, known as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, derives its total significance from balancing recitation and theatricality and the harmonious functioning of each single item, which works in a similar way in metal music and performances. Such a resemblance indicates that metal music, just like Wagnerian musical operas, is formulated on a discipline of musicology and dramaturgy, determined by a system of rules. Audience, as the last item of fusion between Wagner and metal, forms the body of spectators watching the show. However, despite the differences between the two types of audience in terms of ideological expectations, it is a common point for both groups to be absorbed by what they experience on stage, yet this does not make them passive entities; on the contrary for metal and Wagner audiences, alienation effect is minimized via the Dionysian interaction between the actor/singer and the audience.

Conclusion

This study considers Nietzsche as a reference point upon which the main questions of the article are structured: In what ways and to what extent do Dionysian and Apollonian forces, as discussed in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), function in the contexts of metal and Wagnerian musical drama? From which perspectives are the principles of early Greek theatre revisited in metal and opera? And finally, what is the function of exemplifying the discursive fusion between two different music genres, metal and opera?

With an attempt to answer the questions highlighted above, it is asserted that this article is based on interdisciplinary research in the fields of music, philosophy, sociology, and the arts, providing the reader with comparative knowledge and levels of interpretive dimension for an objective and critical analysis. As it is argued in the beginning of this article, a comparative study on two different genres underlines the necessity of internalizing a reflexive perspective and approaching them through cross-cultural juxtaposition. With this attempt, the study has indicated how a discursive fusion is exemplary and relevant between metal and opera. Besides musical fusion, it is observed that the transgressive structure of metal allows the genre to be a possible means of appropriation of classical music. It has also been made clear that without the philosophical formulation of Nietzsche, it would be incomplete to portray the fusion between two separate music genres in terms of the early Greek understanding of ritual-sacrifice-catharsis practice. In other words, metal music and performances, like the examples of early Greek theatre, with their Dionysian spirit, revisit Wagnerian musical operas both in form and sound, bringing the old and the new world together, which I consider a unique dimension in the aesthetic understanding of different genres.



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