

Jazz and Philosophy in the light of Oscar Peterson and Friedrich Nietzsche (2012)

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Introduction

During the last two years I have been profoundly inspired by two great things: The swinging music of Oscar Peterson (1925 – 2007) and the life-affirming writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900). Even Though they express themselves in different ways, I see interesting resemblances in their work.

My assumption is that Nietzsche's theories of the Dionysian and apollonian and it's presence in the greek tragedy has the same liberating and releasing ability as jazz music. I will do this by reading Nietzsche's "Birth of the tragedy" from 1872 and by examine the music and life of Oscar Peterson. I hope this essay will show the relationship between philosophy and Jazz music and give perspectives on how our life and society can improve. My goal is not to state a certain truth, but to inspire people to find their own; to rephrase the famous words of Epicurus: that philosophy which doesn't inspire, is false!

Dionysos and Apollo

In Nietzsche's first book "The birth of the tragedy", he talks about two different sides of human nature: the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Dionysos was the God of lust, suffering and

drunkenness of the ancient greeks. Apollo was the God of images, dreams and order. Nietzsche saw these opposites successfully combined in the greek tragedies, such as the plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus. His assumption is that music was the deepest expression of a metaphysical "truth" in life. The source from where all other art forms are derived. In the process of creating music the starting point is an ecstatic, dionysian desire to express and create. This is a prereflective state where the personal and conscient perspective are gone. A state where the artist creates and expresses himself immediately. But then there's a transformation: Nietzsche uses the tragedy "The Bacchae" by Euripides to describes what happens:

"we see Dionysus and the maenads; we see the intoxicated reveller Archilochus sunk down in sleep—as Euripides describes it for us in the Bacchae, asleep in a high Alpine meadow in the midday sun—and now Apollo steps up to him and touches him with his laurel. The Dionysian musical enchantment of the sleeper now, as it were, flashes around him fiery images, lyrical poems, which are called, in their highest form, tragedies and dramatic dithyramb. "

The Birth of Tragedy §5

Archilochus is touched by the laurel of Apollo and his dionysian dream world is changed into tragedies and dithyramb. The apollonian translates and articulates the immediate dionysian expression and transforms it into images and language. In other words; the spontaneous, ecstatic dionysian expression is shifting from a private perspective into something commonplace and meaningful, as the tragedy. Not only meaningful to the artist himself but to others as well. Instead of being strangers, the opposites Dionysos and Apollo are combined in one expression; the tragedy:

"Here, the lofty and highly praised artistic achievement of Attic tragedy and of the dramatic dithyramb presents itself before our eyes, as the common goal of both impulses, whose secret marriage partnership, after a long antecedent struggle, glorified itself with such a child—at once Antigone and Cassandra."

The Birth of Tragedy §4.

Jazz and Oscar Peterson

If we take a closer look at the nature of jazz and more specific into the music of Oscar Peterson and at the same time apply Nietzsche's thoughts on the greek tragedy, it raises some interesting

questions and gives us some profound perspectives, not only on music, but also on society and life in general.

What first comes to my mind when listening to Peterson's improvisation, is his light, easy and elegant expression. And yet so powerful! The music seems to flow from him effortlessly and unstoppable; joyful and convincing. You get the impression that he's so sure, so present and so into the music that his improvisations couldn't be done in any other way. Is his improvisation a testimony of what Nietzsche understood as Dionysian? An intense, joyful, ecstatic and immediate expression of raw human emotions?

It seems to me that Peterson is able to express the most basic human emotions such as joy, happiness, suffering, power, fear, weakness. On the same time you experience an Apollonian element in his music: he is able to put these emotions into a form. He gave them a way to be articulated; through his strict arrangements, his impressive technique, his absolute control of the instrument, his enormous knowledge of theory and different jazz tunes.

Rhythm as the apollonian form

But the most striking apollonian aspect in Peterson's music and in most jazz is in my opinion the rhythm. The rhythm in jazz is normally characterized by its four-beat structure with an emphasis on the 2nd and 4th beat. The Improvisation is characterized by its syncopation: An unpredictable series of notes which rhythmically emerge on various places around the beat. Jazz educator Hal Galper has some pretty interesting thoughts on this matter. He states that why this improvisational style in Jazz is so special, is that it has a very unique structure: It combines the four-beat rhythm with the syncopated jazz rhythm. Thus giving room for a strict predictable and common beat everybody can lock into while giving room to the personal, unpredictable, immediate, prereflective and syncopated improvisation. As he state; You can be part of a group and still retain your individuality. I think Jazz and the greek tragedy has this in common: Both can contain and express contradictory states in one expression.

The importance of both the dionysian and apollonian aspects

Nietzsche puts heavy emphasis on the dionysian, describing it as the fundamental metaphysical expression. When dealing with jazz and other art forms people tend to forget the importance of combining the dionysian and the apollonian. Either they passionately emphasize the dionysian while arrogantly neglecting the apollonian. On the other hand you can also experience art

becoming too institutionalized, and see people fleeing into the safe apollonian forms and happily forgetting the dionysian. Both sides has to be respected and nurtured. To me, that's when art becomes great. Because then the expression isn't just beautiful or interesting. It also gives it an authority and integrity. It becomes inspiring and becomes an example to follow. Peterson is a perfect example: Joyful, present, sparkling and immediate when improvising. Yet he has put an enormous amount of time and seriousness into his music: practice, preparing and arranging. He talks about how he from an early age learned to strive for the best, how he learned to respect the instrument and to carefully practice every day for hours. He knew what he wanted, where he wanted to go and he stood up for it. He took his talent and his music seriously and he was more than willing to walk that extra mile to create great things. In that matter I think Oscar Peterson is a great inspiration to all of us. Especially in our society where it seems like that the humble and serious approach to learn and to improve your skills is neglected. While telling a story of how skillful you are at something and to promote yourself, sadly seems to be a more important to many.

Contrary emotions united and liberated in the tragedy and jazz

The greek tragedy was a place where the Dionysian; joy and suffering, was given an apollonian expression: We see emotions being transform into expression; language, images, lyrics, dancing. In the same way I think we can detect these original basic human emotions in jazz. But we see that they too are transformed into a common language as in the tragedies. Because of practice, knowledge, and craftsmanship the immediate impulses of desire and emotions are being transformed into sounds which appear beautiful or recognizable to others besides the performer himself. The private emotions are being carefully expressed, and by that very act, it connects the artists private impulses and emotions, with others, with the world.

Nietzsche – articulating the fear

Nietzsche articulated this line of thought in his writing. He was able to use the language very ambiguous and sophisticated. He developed this style throughout his authorship. It's beautifully exemplified in his poetic-philosophical work "Also Sprach Zarathustra" from 1883-85: In this text he touches and articulates the intense and often dark forces within, but at the same time, and thats the important thing, he gave them a poetic and beautiful expression. He gave private emotions a common and understandable language with his use of symbols and pictures. He

advocated acceptance of the dark and the scary to get a richer and more beautiful perspective on life and to be able to develop as human:

“To be sure, I am a forest, and a night of dark trees: but he who is not afraid of my darkness, will find banks full of roses under my cypresses.”

Also Sprach Zarathustra. Part 2, “The dance song”

There’s a dark and scary side of human being, but to face, accept and articulate this side in ourselves as well as in others is a way to overcome it and to find beauty, meaning and life.

Perspectives on Jazz and the tragedy

If we take these two premises for true: 1) That man is a social being with basic needs and emotions. And 2) That life has no meaning except the one human activities gives it. Then the very act of sharing the most basic human emotions must be a very powerful way of connecting with others and to create meaning in a meaningless world. Nietzsche saw this acceptance and artistic expression of the Dionysian as the one thing who gave meaning in a world full of suffering and contradictions. And he saw the Dionysian music expressed as the thing who justified all contradictions and sufferings. A solution to the old theodicy problem:

“The same impulse which summons art into life as the seductive replenishment for further living and the completion of existence also gave rise to the Olympian world, in which the Hellenic “Will” held before itself a transfiguring mirror. In this way, the gods justify the lives of men, because they themselves live it—that is the only satisfactory theodicy!”

“The Birth of Tragedy” §3.

I think it’s important to find and use symbols, languages and expressions of our most basic emotions. Especially emotions which are labeled as taboo or shameful. Nietzsche (and Dostoevsky) was among the first to describe the inner life of man; his drives and the unconsciousness. Which later was developed by Sigmund Freud. Freud showed us that if our emotions are being repressed it will come out in some other (often destructive) form. In “On the Genealogy of morals” from 1887 Nietzsche describes how repressed feelings of envy and bitterness can result in the development of heavenly and idealistic values, created only to cope with these unwanted and repressed emotions. Resulting in what Nietzsche called the slave morality. I think both Jazz and the greek tragedy is able to translate and ‘understand’ our most

basic emotions and thus liberate them. It can make a private emotion which can seem shameful in ones own mind, less scary because it is being transformed into something beautiful and meaningful. And because it's an emotion other people have experienced or can relate to in some way.

Ending and music!

Nietzsche died in 1900. One year later Louis Armstrong was born in New Orleans. The man who invented jazz and taught the world how to swing. A great line of jazz musicians followed Armstrong and swung in their own way. Oscar Peterson was one of them. Continentals and decades apart and despite different expressions the philosophy and poetry of Nietzsche and the swinging jazz music of Oscar Peterson are closely related.

I will conclude this essay with a piece performed by the Oscar Peterson Trio and composed by Peterson called "Salute to Bach". It couldn't be a better example to exemplify the thoughts in this text. It's Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen on bass and Martin Drew on drums. Things to look out for: What's does he repeat? When does the syncopation merge with the four-beat rhythm? How does the trio's use of volume and dynamics affect you? What seems improvised and what seems arranged? And lots of other things to look out for. But the most important is to enjoy this sublime and wonderful music!

Salute to Bach – The Oscar Peterson Trio:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPPQLzwCosI>

References:

- *The Birth of Tragedy* – Friedrich Nietzsche
- *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – Friedrich Nietzsche
- *On the Genealogy of Morals* – Friedrich Nietzsche
- *Forward Motion* – Hal Galper
- Hal Galper on syncopation: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2XnB5G6oSc>
- Album: *We get Requests* (1964) – The Oscar Peterson Trio
- *Keeping the groove alive*. Documentary on Oscar Peterson:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4lhfoFv9Uw>

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