

'God gave us music so that we, *first and foremost*, will be guided upward by it.'  
– Friedrich Nietzsche (aged 14)

The music on this album was largely inspired by the philosophy of Nietzsche, particularly by the parable of the tightrope walker in the opening section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Nietzsche's German term *Seiltänzer* is usually given in English translations as *rope dancer* – which is what I too will be using.

Nietzsche is by far the most musical of philosophers. From a young age he was deeply involved with music: he composed, worked on music theory and studied ancient metre. Further, he befriended composers and music critics such as Carl Fuchs, Heinrich Köselitz and, of course, his idol Richard Wagner – whose *Tristan and Isolde* he played at the piano at the age of 16, before it had even been premièred.

It was Wagner who wanted to meet Nietzsche, after having been told by an acquaintance of the latter's extensive musical knowledge. Nietzsche soon became a regular in the Wagner household. Along with Wagner's wife Cosima they would discuss Schopenhauer, Greek mythology and music, and even celebrated Christmas together. Wagner, who liked to be called 'the Master', would sometimes take advantage of Nietzsche's idolisation and didn't hesitate to ask Nietzsche for all kinds of help – ranging from assistance with his autobiography to buying him tailor-made silk underwear.

Nietzsche originally wanted to become a composer. When it became clear to him that his greater talent was for words, not music – Hans von Bülow had likened his *Manfred-Meditationen* to a rape of Euterpe, the muse of music – he was frustrated. But he also realized that 'without music, life would be a mistake'; until the very end of Nietzsche's life, music would play an indispensable role. Nietzsche's suggestion that his philosophy should be considered as his musical legacy is there-

fore not surprising. In a letter he suggested that his *Zarathustra* belonged in the same category as symphonies and, criticising an early work, he once remarked that he should have 'sung, not spoken'. Even if Nietzsche's compositions are not earth-shattering, his piano improvisations are said to have been excellent. Whenever Wagner was out walking the dogs, Nietzsche would play on the Master's piano. His audience consisted solely of Cosima, who reportedly experienced a hallucinatory intoxication on hearing Nietzsche's wild improvisations. During these private moments at the Master's piano, the two would find themselves in a trance-like state, a spiritual bond developing between them.

I believe there is a reciprocal relationship between Nietzsche's great skills in improvisation and his experimental style of philosophising – which, ironically, he adopts after his break with Wagner in 1876. It is in his detachment from Wagner that Nietzsche starts to work out his concept of the 'free spirit'.

Free spirits liberate themselves from any conventional constraints and prejudices, from idols, ideals and belief systems. Rather than seeking definitive answers, they keep exploring in the manner of a scientist. A free spirit is like a 'thinking snowball' who, by constantly changing, can avoid letting his opinions harden into convictions. Free spirits refuse to conform to any morally correct opinions that are imposed upon them. They prefer critical thought; distrustful of anything that is fixed, they keep examining assumptions and presuppositions both in others and in themselves. Free spirits realise that truth is inexhaustible, much like an *abyss* – and yet, they are not afraid to *gaze into it*. And like an abyss, the truth can *gaze back into them* and make them feel unsettled. But free spirits do not care so much for safety and certainty; they prefer 'dancing even near abysses', standing straight even on the thinnest ropes – like a rope dancer.

Thus, the rope dancer stands for freedom; he is not bound by anything. The price for that freedom is that he literally has nothing to hold on to; it is therefore

inevitable that the rope dancer will find himself **off balance**. A rope dancer is indeed in constant danger: either standing still because of a lack of courage or rushing ahead as a result of hubris may cause a plunge into the abyss.

In Nietzsche's parable the rope dancer is soon joined by a **buffoon**, who distracts him and eventually leaps over him, thus causing his downfall and ensuing death. The buffoon wants to get to the other side of the rope as quickly as possible, and thinks the rope dancer is an annoying hindrance to his goal. 'Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the **Superman** – a rope over an abyss.' But the buffoon wants to become Superman straight away, without having to first make the best out of his own life.

In order to become a Superman, a rope dancer must be prepared to question his standpoints. He must make adjustments to his equilibrium with every step he takes; it would even be dangerous for him to stick to one and the same standpoint. There is not one single and permanent way of maintaining balance; every situation asks for new adjustments. But the rope dancer must **beware the buffoon**. He can all too easily be leapt-over and defeated by whoever yells loudest, is unwilling to listen or to examine his own convictions. Maybe one could put it like this: a rope dancer is in constant danger of becoming a buffoon himself.

Constantly struggling with his health, Nietzsche was a perennial **convalescent** who increasingly needed music as a physiological alleviation. Wagner's music couldn't offer him that. With Wagner, Nietzsche maintained, 'one loses one's secure footing'; instead of walking and dancing, one enters a wild ocean of tone-painting and unending melodies – eventually causing one to drown. Thus, Nietzsche observed that **the Master** simply **couldn't dance**, because **his feet were not light enough**.

One of Nietzsche's own compositions is called *Das Fragment an sich* ('The fragment in itself', 1871) – perhaps mocking his own difficulties with compositional

form and structure. Unusually, the piece consists of a melody that has a *da capo* sign (repeat), but no closing double bar line. The only way to play the piece correctly would therefore be to repeat it for all eternity. One could speculate that Nietzsche had this in mind when he developed the concept of ***Eternal Recurrence*** and when he invoked the image of a Superman, 'the most high-spirited, alive and world-affirming human being' who 'wants to have what was and is repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably *da capo*'. Thus, Nietzsche cunningly turned his compositional weakness into a strength.

The Superman as a human ideal can be explained by the famous parable that follows that of the rope dancer in *Also sprach Zarathustra*: the ***Three Metamorphoses of the Spirit***. The metamorphoses pertain to three stages of self-creation: from spirit to camel, from camel to lion and from lion to child. The camel loves to carry its burden: it obeys its teachers and idols, conforms to existing values without questioning them. The lion, like a free spirit, stands for independence: it wants to say 'no' to all authority; to God, morality and any existing values. As a beast of prey, its paws are made to fight, not to embrace. But the lion can't stop fighting and therefore remains unable to create new values. For that, the final stage of the metamorphoses is needed: the child. The child is a new beginning, a blissful innocence who has the ability to embrace existing values and play with them. The child looks at the world with curiosity and wonder, as if it sees everything for the first time. The child wants to explore, to play and to dance with life. Thus, the final goal of our rope dance, the Superman, turns out to be a joyful creature, whose feet are lightest of all – a ***laughing child***.

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