

Nietzsche: Tragedy, Music and Opera in Western Civilization

By L. Jarrett Barnhill, MD, DFAPA, FAACAP*

Few of us think about evolutionary biology, early infant development and culture change while enjoying the experience of dance, symphonic music, opera or drama. Nor do we consider such pleasurable experiences tied to our innate capacity for play with ideas as adults. Neuro-physiologically play, like learning by imitation are key players in human evolution and brain development. Both are foundational to social attachment and once mastered with primary caregivers provide lifelong tools for processing increasingly complex social information. Embedded in this process is the transformation of language from infant directed speech (baby-talk) to conversation and social discourse. By early childhood we are ready to master specialized skills with symbols/imagination, social roles and rituals, work-related skills and in our industrialized culture, academic learning. But even as language increasingly dominates communication and learning, it never replaces prosody and nonverbal gestures as a means of conveying social-emotional information. In this sense the musicality and ballet of language persist.

Some Paleo-linguists hypothesize that pantomiming/imitating, dancing and music were vital to our neurological evolution. Imagine an evening when the "conversation" consisted mainly of dancing, chanting and music as group members re-enacted the day's experiences. We don't know at what point these event recreations changed into pantomimed stories, proto-myths and rituals. Ethologically we might claim that dancing-singing-imitating and

proto-language complemented each other and gradually replaced grooming as the medium for social hierarchies (dominance), emotional attachment and social bonding. This metamorphosis may explain the power of music and dance to express the deeper magic of emotional communication essential to the arts.

Some years ago Leonard Bernstein (Neumann lectures at Harvard) explored the relationship between psycholinguistics and music. In this series of lectures Bernstein compared Chomsky's hypotheses regarding the relationship between the deep structure of language and music. He concluded that music has more in common with poetry than prose, especially in the expression of transcendent, emotional experiences that are unmatched by syntax and conventional semantics. Our capacity to re-enact (drama) and express emotional through dance also tap into the transcendent and unconscious power of music.

These skills are capable of expanding social and emotional relationships far beyond the power of words alone.

In the 19th century, the German philosopher Nietzsche focused on the relationship between music, drama and language. In the **Birth of Tragedy**, he used Greek tragedy as the starting point for exploring the ever-changing relationship between music and drama. To Nietzsche, the ancient Greeks were well aware that music stirred emotions in ways that words alone could not reach more deeply into the soul by circumventing reason and rational analysis. But the Greeks were also aware of the dangers of heightened emotionality and the need for balance. To Nietzsche,

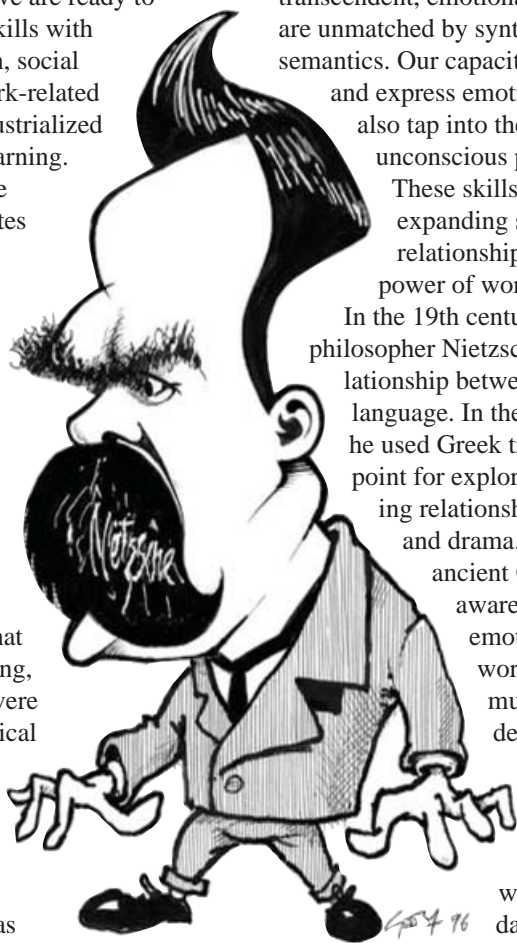
this awareness created a dynamic tension between two ancient modes of expression: the Dionysian world in which emotion, sensuality and loss of self; and the Apol-



lonian in which philosophical realism, individual will, search for meaning, and balance helped control the animal passions. In Nietzsche's view, the philosophies of Socrates, Plato and mostly Aristotle fostered the ideal of balance between ego-dissolving sensuality (Dionysian) and verbal expression, idealism and psychological insight (Apollonian). Yet art that enhanced self-reflection and heightened moral-ethical sensibilities was safer for the psyche and *polis* than regression and dissolution. As a result new modes of drama transformed the ancient power of music to arouse or tame the beast within. The chorus became the conduit connecting these elemental forces.

The transformation from mystical dissolution to self-expression also affected "classical" Western music. Compare the Gregorian chants (monophony) of the 9th century; polyphony of the 14th century, 19th-20th century composers. By the height of the Romantic era, Richard Wagner (Nietzsche's short lived egotistical friend) refocused opera within Apollonian-Dionysian tradition. His operas (music dramas) redefined earlier *opera seria* and *buffa* into music drama- both music and drama were on equal and complementary footing. But change continued along many divergent pathways, passing through Schoenberg into today's death metal. These transitions suggest devolution from the Apollonian (religious and classical music) back to the Dionysian reveries (the chaos of mosh pits and head-banging rock).

Yet according to composer and music scholar Robert Greenberg, these new forms are continuations of historical struggles to define music style and emerging, individual creativity. Musical expression changed from spiritual and [Continued on page 27]



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religious expression (mystics like Hildegard of Bingen excluded) to one that increasingly emphasized an identified composer and more secular modes of self-expression. The style of music morphed in tandem with the accelerating pace of socio-cultural change. As a result some 21st century critics of hard rock (heavy and/or death metal) suggest that the composer and lyricist are dying in popular culture. Yet according to my 25 year-old son there are widespread efforts to fuse Medieval, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner and Bluegrass with metal. These steps are redefining not eliminating the composer as we know him/her. We are also seeing the dissolution/redefinition of the self in these synergetic art forms.

In literature, Shakespeare used poetic drama while later novelists like Virginia Wolff, William Faulkner, Latin American magical realists and modern poets struggled to capture and convey individual experiences through evocative lyricism or metaphors. Although writers grapple with troubling emotions, metaphysics and spiritualism, few would confuse the Faulkner's **Sound and Fury** or TS Eliot's **The Wasteland**, or Shakespeare's **King Lear** with theological or philosophical treatises. These authors grappled with the limitations of language, plot and story-telling, the unpredictability of reality and the inner dialog or streaming of thought and perceptions. Applying Nietzsche's hypotheses we witnessed a collision between Apollonian order- Dionysian sensuality and the inherent limitations of printed language.

For us the pace of technological and socio-cultural change plays out in music, literature, dance and the visual arts. But the arts do not occur in a vacuum. The tension described by Nietzsche and Greenberg is in constant flux and creates a sense of emotional uncertainty and social dissonance. Using this formula, our next series of article explore the contraction of artistic tastes due in response to changing ideas about self-expression. §

PHYSICIAN PROFILE *continued from page 11*

Being elected a Fellow of the American College of Physicians in 2009 was a major accomplishment for Patel. He has also served on the Clinical Quality Committee of the Key Independent Physicians Association, an organization of more than 140 physicians who promote quality assurance initiatives. Patel and Juneja were the first physicians in Wake County to be recognized by the National Committee for Quality Assurance.

In 2006, Patel joined other physicians in establishing the Triangle Indian-American Physician's Society. "I realized that 15 to 20 percent of doctors in the United States are of Indian descent," but they make up only 1 percent of the population. "We should give back," he said. TIPS hosts Continuing Medical Education (CME) as a means of "establishing a professional collaboration between physicians of various backgrounds and fostering relationships with medical societies to bring

the best of medical attention to Triangle citizens," Patel said. TIPS member physicians also serve patients at annual health fairs.

Two years later, he expanded his efforts to build a voice for Indian-Americans in the state. He is a founding executive member of the North Carolina Indian-American Political Action Committee, which raises money for candidates of both political parties. The group hosted the first ever Indian-American Day at the state capitol in Raleigh in 2009, drawing state legislators, Governor Bev Perdue, and members of the Council of State. Later that year, Patel joined a group of nine doctors who flew to Washington, D.C. to discuss Medicare reimbursement formula, tort reform and other policy issues with North Carolina's representatives in Congress.

In 2010, Governor Perdue appointed Patel to the State Health Coordinating Council, a body that serves the N.C.

Department of Health and Human Services by directing the development of the annual State Medical Facilities Plan. In January of this year, Patel spoke before the GOP House Caucus Health Policy Committee about ways to reduce healthcare costs for the state. He is currently also a member of the Legislative Cabinet of the North Carolina Medical Society.

Given his growing involvement in health care policy, it's fair to ask whether Patel would consider a run for office himself. He quickly answers, "No. I can work on shaping policy, but I love to come to the office to see patients. This is a dream job."

At home, Patel and his wife Poonam are focused on their two sons, Sahaj, age 11, and Sahil, age 9. Above all, he wants them to build a strong educational foundation. "In the U.S.," he said, "if you're educated, you're going to get a fair shot." §

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