

Sublime Disappearances

Feeling Buddhism in late-nineteenth-century western music

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ABSTRACT | This essay explores how the Buddhist-inspired works of two late-nineteenth-century western composers, Richard Wagner and Dudley Buck, interpret Buddhist source material through the aesthetic discourse of the sublime dominant in post-Romantic music. In the opera *Parsifal* (1882), Wagner develops his philosophy of *nirvāṇic* sound into experimental passages intended to provoke spiritually intense feelings of transcendence, while Buck's 1886 musical adaptation of Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* derives the sublime style of Handelian oratorio to engage his audience in a grand celebration of moral renewal. Despite their different approaches to mediating the sublime, both Wagner and Buck use it to present Buddhism directly to the *feelings* of their listeners, while by the same token dissolving its troubling foreign embodiment into sound. Ultimately, this essay argues that such appeals to feeling represent a significant yet under-explored dimension in Buddhism's history and experience in the west, contributing to its subjectivization and detraditionalization.

KEYWORDS | Western Buddhism; Buddhism and Music; Nineteenth-Century Music; Aesthetics of the Sublime; Richard Wagner; Dudley Buck

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Recent scholarship describes the reception of Buddhism in the nineteenth-century west in terms of discovery (Almond 1988; App 2014), encounter and awakening (Batchelor 2011), invention (Masuzawa 2005), and curation (Lopez 1995), to name a few notable approaches. The distinct nuances of each suggest the variety of interpretive processes by which Buddhism became known in the west. At the same time, they collaborate in constructing whatever happened to Buddhism in the modern west as—precisely—a matter of knowing. Aligned with Edward Said's critiques of orientalism, the prevailing rhetoric of encounter and interpretation, or even invention, contributes to the notion that Buddhism came to be in western culture through exercises of western knowledge.

In one sense, arguing against this position would be difficult. The dominance of European intellectual enterprise—archaeology, philology, philosophy, and so on—in determining the contours of “Buddhism” for western discourse is undeniable. Yet explaining this hermeneutical process solely in terms of knowing makes us liable to miss the attendant forces that have so enduringly engaged westerners with Buddhism. Feeling—alongside knowing—brought Buddhism into its western manifestations.

Indeed, a degree of affective force can be detected behind any decision to investigate, criticize, or experiment with “the Buddha's Religion”: westerners in great number have done all these things since at least the late eighteenth century. Evidence of the abundance and significance of westerners' feelings about Buddhism is not in short supply, even among its most thoughtful interpreters: as Roger-Pol Droit (2003) has shown, for instance, European philosophers' assessments of Buddhism express powerful feelings of hope and fear that reflect the social, political, and religious insecurities of the post-Enlightenment. Yet feeling did not remain merely subliminal to European discourse on Buddhism. By the turn of the nineteenth century, it had become an explicit preoccupation of German Romantic thinkers, whose circles frequently converged with those of orientalist scholars.¹ For early Romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), himself an important Sanskritist, feeling took on definition not just as the non-cognitive, pre-conceptual, thus ineffable ground of physiological and psychological experience, but as both a fundamental stratum of our rational subjectivity and perhaps our best avenue for transcending conceptual limitations altogether and approaching the non-discursive truth of the Absolute (Schulte-Sasse et al. 1997, 244-245). This faculty, though involved in all rational activity, was seen to be powerfully accessed in the creation and perception of art and essential to philosophy: according to Schlegel (1991, 14), “all art should become science and all science art: poetry and philosophy should be made unified.”

That the Romantic preoccupation with aesthetic feeling took shape often in such proximity to orientalist “science” suggests how entangled Romantic aes-

¹ For instance, in the social worlds of Johann Gottfried Herder and the Schlegel brothers, or later—as we shall soon find—in Richard Wagner's own coterie.

thetics would become with the western exploration of Asian religions. Moreover, the fact that subsequent western artists did explicitly engage Buddhist material in their own feeling-laden works, as we shall see, demonstrates the conviction that whatever Buddhism's content might be, it could be best communicated through its aesthetic dimensions. Growing up alongside and increasingly through Romantic art and its inheritors, Buddhism in the west had no choice but to become an even more distinctly felt entity, to be known through powerful artistic mediations of feeling, by audiences typically larger than those of the latest scholarly translation or philosophical tract.

This "sentimental history" of Buddhism in the west, implied though it necessarily is within the better-known intellectual genealogy, has been curiously underexamined. David McMahan (2008, 117–147), for instance, acknowledges the importance of Romantic ideologies of feeling in the development of "Buddhist modernism" but shies away from describing nineteenth-century European artists' direct engagements of Buddhism, instead focusing on D.T. Suzuki and other twentieth-century Buddhists' appropriations of Romantic discourse. He thus leaves unexplored a period during which many nineteenth-century artists were engaging Buddhism, self-consciously, with important consequences.² In response, this essay seeks to demonstrate the importance of feeling—and its mediation by Romantic discourse—in the development of western Buddhism, and to suggest how these Buddhist-Romantic mediations echo back into the history of western art. It does so by telling a story of two late-nineteenth-century artists, Richard Wagner and Dudley Buck, who quite differently attempted to interpret Buddhist ideas and narratives to audiences in western Europe and America through the peculiarly Romantic medium of music.

Wagner and Buck both engaged the aesthetic discourse of the sublime dominant in nineteenth-century art to accommodate Buddhism to western audiences' expectations while simultaneously opening and intensifying the ways their audiences could *feel* that content: despite their many differences, Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882) and Buck's *The Light of Asia* (1886) both aimed to convey through their Buddhist-inspired music feelings of astonishment, ecstatic absorption, and perhaps even intimations of the timeless, infinite, and absolute. Wagner sought in the touted Romantic powers of music an expression of the otherwise ineffable transcendence of *nirvāṇa*, while Buck's more conservative approach nevertheless aimed to draw the listening public into a grand, anthemic celebration of moral renewal. Through these sensational treatments, Wagner and Buck also achieve a strange disappearance of their Buddhist foundations into ambiguous half-presences, itself arguably a sublime effect that anticipates developments in both the Buddhism and aesthetics of the twentieth-century west.

² Marc Lussier is closer to engaging this history than McMahan but emphasizes "the confluence of mental operations and social commitments" between Romanticism and Buddhism over "direct contact and subsequent influence" (2011, 94).

These two composers' attempts to render Buddhism sensible in the extreme, even supersensual, manner promised by the Romantic discourse on the sublime helped transform unthinkable elements of the newly "discovered" Buddhist religion into alluring, accessible aesthetic experiences. Ultimately, I will argue that their appeals to the sublime helped attune Buddhism to the west's growing investment in the primacy of felt experience and the transcendence of traditional religious forms.³ Demonstrating the significance of the Romantic imperative to feel within the history of Buddhism in the west, this essay finally suggests the resonance of a nineteenth-century "Buddhist sublime" with the avant-garde and postmodern aesthetics of twentieth-century western art.

1 A Musical History of the Sublime

According to Richard Taruskin (1989, 249), "the history of music in the nineteenth century could be written in terms of the encroachment of the sublime upon the domain of the beautiful—of the 'great' upon the pleasant—to the point where for some great musicians, with Wagner at their head, the former all but superseded the latter as the defining attribute of *Tonkunst*, the art of tones." Seen in the light of its increasing dominance in post-Romantic music, in great part through Wagner himself, the fact that Wagner's and Buck's musical adaptations of Buddhist ideas and narratives are so consistent with the aesthetics of the sublime is unsurprising. Yet both composers were clearly purposeful in pairing their Buddhist sources with sublime stylization, respectively drawing from a considerable aesthetic tradition to achieve specific ends in their Buddhist works. Before detailing how *Parsifal* and *The Light of Asia* engage the sublime, then, we should survey its development in western aesthetic discourse to determine how its ideology and related musical techniques came to feel necessary to the two composers' Buddhist projects and what Buddhism stood to gain from this aesthetic manipulation. Moreover, as Kiene Brillenburg Wurth (2009, 16) has argued, the "musically sublime" is far from monolithic, encompassing in its history a diversity of potentials that will help us contextualize the important differences between Wagner's and Buck's approaches to a "Buddhist sublime."

The grand narrative of the sublime's suffusion of western music—and the reciprocal development of the so-called "musically sublime"—begins in the mid-eighteenth century with the career and critical reception of George Frideric Handel (1685–1759).⁴ Following the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French and English translations of Longinus's early common-era Greek tract *On the Sublime*,

³ Both characteristics of modern "detraditionalization" take root in the nineteenth century most famously through the thought of Schleiermacher. As McMahan (2008, 42–44) has observed, they are critically important to the development of Buddhist Modernism.

⁴ According to Brillenburg Wurth (2009, 102), nineteenth-century composers such as Wagner shifted from an enthusiasm for the sublime *in* music to explorations of the "musically sublime:" that is, they sought the sublime not in music's representative powers but in its own ineffable, ephemeral qualities.

the critical term “sublime” had experienced a great popularity in European letters, with a profusion of early-eighteenth-century tracts celebrating the works of Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden, especially, in Longinian terms of thematic grandeur, stylistic bombast, and readerly astonishment. As Claudia L. Johnson (1986, 519–522) shows, critics first began to associate Handel’s oeuvre with sublimity not in reference to his musical compositions but to his vast output, which in scale resembled that of the “sublime” English poets. They also celebrated the grandeur of his works’ Biblical subject matter, which the libretti dramatized far more liberally than traditional church music ever had.

Before long, however, critics began to appreciate the sublimity of Handel’s compositions in properly musical terms. Anticipating Edmund Burke’s observations in his landmark 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Sublime and the Beautiful*, Handel’s works became celebrated as sublime for their rugged, asymmetrical forms.⁵ Breaking with—and indeed de-forming—the measured, symmetrical rationalism dominant in contemporary Italian opera, for instance, his compositions involved drastic shifts in register, tempo, dynamics, and orchestral color that directly contravened Baroque ideals of beauty and caused their listeners a sensational, if not straightforwardly pleasant, excitement. As Johnson (1986, 520–525) demonstrates, these shocking characteristics of Handel’s compositions prompted critics such as John Mainwaring to refer directly to Longinus’s (Roberts 1907, 137) key discussions of the flawed colossus and the imperfect genius in celebrating the strong affective responses that they provoked.

Following Handel’s death, the sublime quality of his compositions was exaggerated in commemorative performances that assembled unprecedentedly vast orchestral and choral ensembles as a kind of competitive spectacle. The stunning visual and sonic volume achieved by such ensembles regularly led critics to cite Longinus’s terminology of *ekstasis*—being pushed outside of our default sensory settings—and Burke’s related commentary on the invigorating potentials of intense sound. In Brillenburg Wurth’s (2009, 11) synthesis, “sublimity, in this Handelian context, was above all *mass*... a transgression of form in terms of size” that relatedly de-formed eighteenth-century audiences’ sense of the possible, and even challenged the possibilities of sense, with at least the intimation of transcendence. Following a 1784 commemorative performance of Handelian oratorio, a critic cited by Johnson (1986, 516) writes that “the immense volume and torrent of sound was almost too much for the head or the senses to bear... we were elevated into a species of delirium.” His invocations of overwhelming ex-

⁵ Johnson (1986, 525–526) suggests that the volume and dynamism of Handel’s composition celebrated as sublime in contemporary music-critical discourse actually influenced Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry*, published during the middle period of Handel’s career. Indeed, although Burke (1990, 75–76) mentions no composers by name, the foremost characteristics of sound that he values as sublime are “great variety and quick transitions,” “intermittence,” and “excessive loudness,” qualities consistently emphasized in contemporary Handel criticism. Burke’s supporting, sonic metaphor of “the shouting of multitudes” meanwhile resonates with a familiar image of the Handelian choir.

cess and elevation in relation to *sound* are notable. These Longinian tropes' application directly to the experience of hearing Handelian music, and the likelihood that such characteristics actually influenced Burke's aesthetic theory, mark a key development in the musical history of the sublime.

The second "sublime genius" of the western musical tradition—at least for our purposes—exerts a key influence in its Romantic development. Like Handel, whom he idolized, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) was famed for the extraordinary dynamism of his compositions. Like Handel's, Beethoven's expansive works also involved tonal and rhythmic asymmetries as well as sudden, extreme shifts in volume and orchestration that—in their capacity to subvert "architectonic" formal and semantic expectations—evoked the "complex pleasure" that had become associated through Burke and now Immanuel Kant with the sublime.⁶ On the grounds of these qualities and their consonance with an increasingly metaphysical sublime, Taruskin identifies Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, specifically, as "a milestone—perhaps the point of departure (1989, 249) in the history of the sublime's "encroachment" on the beautiful in nineteenth-century music. Beethoven's preference for wordless music and his historical position after Kant ensured that his approach to the sublime and its reception were more invested in his works' relevance to the ineffable realm of personal, subjective feeling and metaphysical truth: following Maynard Solomon's (1986) analysis of the Ninth Symphony, Taruskin (1989, 248) argues that whereas much eighteenth-century music embraced a precisely encoded, public semiotic, Beethoven's early-nineteenth-century compositions embodied meanings that nonetheless "cannot be fully comprehended according to some socially sanctioned code. They... become subjective, hermetic, gnomic."

Although separated by 150 years, these observations resonate with E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1813 essay *Beethoven's Instrumental Music* (1989, 96–103). Here, Hoffmann suggests that Beethoven perfects the "peculiar nature of music" to both communicate our "innermost mysteries" and transport us, in the same motion, "out of the everyday into the realm of the infinite."⁷ His criticism exploits the quasi-mystical dimension of Idealism, privileging the artistic genius as a kind of high priest of subjective experience, gifted with the ability to present the otherwise inaccessible, ineffable absolute aesthetically: enthusiastically breaking from Kant's more cautious treatments of the subject (and neglect of music),

6 Briefly, Kant's theory of the sublime involves the perception of things "absolutely great," whose magnitude and/or intuited threat pushes the distressed subject to the limits of their powers of apprehension, but by the same motion awakens them to the "supersensual," transcendent faculty of reason which is conscious of this inadequacy and *can* comprehend the infinite (2007, 88–89). This experience—with its passage from pain to self-satisfied pleasure—demands that "the soul, not nature, deserves to be the object of the respectful awe typical of the sublime feeling" (Brillenburg Wurth 2009, 4). Kant's centering of the subject as both the source and object of the sublime feeling departs importantly from previous theories and has important consequences for the critical reception of the Beethovenian sublime.

7 Beethoven himself understood Kant's philosophy as equating "the moral law within us, and the starry heavens above us" (Taruskin 1989, 251).

Hoffmann seems confident that the noumenal is within reach for the musical genius. Although Taruskin (1989, 249) is critical of such Romantic ardor, he reiterates that Beethoven's musical semantics "are not so private as to render the musical discourse altogether incomprehensible, but they do render its message ineffable and to that extent, oracular." The music seems to point to some meaning beyond the limits of imaginative apprehension and language, but not beyond intuition. Whereas Handel's spectacular, straightforwardly semantic music and its massive performances unleashed excesses of sensation and engaged the community in sublime experiences (of itself, in an important sense), Beethoven's compositions and their reception made sublime effects matter within the experiential dimensions of subjectivity and their opening into the wordless, transcendent realm of ideas. His work was appreciated by early-nineteenth-century critics as sublime in the Kantian sense that its overwhelming qualities induced in the listening subject the realization of ineffable, "supersensual" truths: through the intense feelings unleashed by the Grand Style in music, subjects came to know about themselves. No longer content to be beautiful, music after Beethoven needed to be "absolutely great," not only in affective power, but also in metaphysical, indeed spiritual, import.

Almost sixty years after Hoffmann's essay, Wagner would reiterate these elements of Beethoven's "sublime" genius—with some significant, added details—in his commemorative 1870 essay on the composer. By this point in his career, the sublime quality of music supposedly revealed by Beethoven, its ability to reveal the absolute, was something Wagner strove to elaborate in his own compositions. Yet thanks in large part to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), as we shall find, Wagner had begun to interpret the sublime in peculiarly Buddhist terms.

2 The Schopenhauerian Confluence

The characteristically Romantic notion that music "possesses a mysterious and self-contained character that stands in opposition to the world of everyday experience" and "[unveils to us] a secret domain" (Lippman 1999, 123) is significantly elaborated and amplified in Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818). With its confluence of post-Kantian metaphysics and quasi-Buddhist asceticism, his masterwork is the true kernel from which this essay springs.

Here, Schopenhauer re-inscribes Kant's metaphysical binary of noumenon and phenomenon in terms of the absolute reality, or will, and its sensible manifestation as representation or appearance. Underlying all existence, will is "an aimless and invisible drive pushing forth different life forms... and finally annihilating them just as blindly and vigorously" (Brillenburger 2009, 74). Noume-

nal, it is omnipresent yet elusive. We cannot perceive it directly, but everything that exists, including ourselves, is an act of will made perceptible. As such, we are metaphysically bound to the constant, blind, ultimately unquenchable striving of the will, and subject to the chaos it demands of phenomenal existence. The resonance with the Buddha's second Noble Truth—of the fundamental relationship of desire and suffering—is notable: as Stephen Cross (2013, 39) has shown, Schopenhauer was aware of the basic lines of Buddhist doctrine as early as 1813, and famously cultivated his philosophy's relationship with Buddhism throughout the rest of his life. Having given Kant's system this pessimistic reiteration, Schopenhauer goes on to prescribe a quasi-Buddhistic practice of renunciation: to the extent possible, freeing ourselves from suffering demands that we realize and renounce the activity of will that grounds our existence.

Schopenhauer's metaphysical structuring also enables him to develop a theory of aesthetic contemplation and its value to the renunciant. Elaborating Kant's aesthetics, book three of *The World as Will and Representation* asserts that all aesthetic contemplation has the power of momentarily stilling our will and thus elevating us into a fleeting experience of liberation, or pure, will-less knowledge. Unlike the beautiful, however, which achieves this effect without resistance from the subject, Schopenhauer (1969, 201–202) describes the “elevating” power of the sublime as a “struggle” in which the subject first perceives the object of aesthetic contemplation as actively hostile to their existence, thus activating and making them aware of their most basic will—to continue existing. If the subject is able in this moment to catch and subdue the reaction of the will, they have not only been elevated to will-less knowledge, but also to a clear perception and renunciation of their own will. Enough exposure to this educative aesthetic experience thus serves the renunciant's practice.⁸

Later in book three, Schopenhauer discusses the arts and the kinds of aesthetic experience they stimulate. His metaphysical distinction between the world as will and as phenomenal appearance asserts a division between the “temporal” art of music and the plastic arts of sculpture, painting, and even poetry: whereas these latter exist only as phenomenal representations within the phenomenal world, music “does not copy or imitate (individual) things within that world, but rather runs parallel to it, like an analogy with its own independent status” (Brillenburg Wurth 2009, 75). In fact, music—in its immediate, non-representative nature—directly taps and makes perceptible the will: it “never expresses the phenomenon but only the inner nature, the in-itself of all phenomena, the will itself” (Schopenhauer 1969, 261). This distinction demands that the contemplation of music—beyond providing momentary deliverance from the misery of willful existence, as in the appreciation of painting, for instance—confronts us directly with noumenal reality in a rare, sensible manifestation. In a

⁸ The likely accidental resonance of Schopenhauer's account of the sublime with Buddhist meditative traditions involving the contemplation of charnel grounds and corpses, for instance, is interesting.

kind of analogy with the sublime theorized earlier, music becomes a means for the subject to recognize, observe, and turn away from the activity of the will. Schopenhauer's system thus singles music out for its inherent, metaphysical association with the sublime, and identifies it—beyond its Romantic configuration as a portal to the “secret domain” of the infinite—as a vehicle of liberation from the suffering of existence. These ideas, as we shall soon see, would determine to great extent Wagner's own view of music as a sublime spiritual force.

3 Parsifal

In his essay on Beethoven, Richard Wagner (1813–1883) extends Schopenhauer's Buddhist-inflected theory of the musically sublime to emphasize music's ability to rupture the boundaries of time, space, and identity, effecting the listener's “mystic passage” out of the phenomenal world in “a spiritual experience of self-loss” and dissolution into the infinite (Brillenburger Wurth 2009, 86). By 1870, Wagner had been immersed in both Schopenhauer's philosophy and his own enthusiastic engagement with orientalist scholarship for over fifteen years.⁹ Shortly after reading *The World as Will and Representation* for the first time, in 1854, he read Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien* (1844), a work to which he returned, with Carl Friedrich Koeppen's *Die Religion des Buddha und ihre Entstehung* (1857), throughout the rest of his life. In two letters from 1855, Wagner expresses his excitement over the “sublime” religion of Buddha, detailing his Schopenhauerian understandings of worldly bondage and rebirth, and their ultimate transcendence through renunciation and compassion in the experience of *nirvāṇa*.¹⁰ As Hermann Danuser (1994) and Ulrike Kienzle (2007) have argued, the late 1850s saw Wagner developing these understandings into distinct musical techniques. Expressing the quasi-karmic persistence of events, concepts, and identities through epic time with repeated musical passages (*Leitmotiv*), he also devised methods of rupturing musical time in sonic expressions of total self-loss and absorption. By 1859 he had given these techniques their most celebrated realization in *Tristan und Isolde*, whose famous, final chord dissolves the striving, motif-driven chromaticism of the entire work into an overwhelming impression of release.¹¹

Yet the influence of Wagner's Buddhist reading extended beyond his musical theories and techniques: inspired by a “legend” from the Buddha's biography re-

9 Buschinger (2017) shows that Wagner's earliest serious conversations on Asian religion were likely with his brother-in-law, the orientalist Hermann Brockhaus, who had studied with Eugène Burnouf in Paris in the 1830s.

10 In these two letters, Wagner also describes his conviction that “only in light of Buddhism can Christianity liberate itself” (Borchmeyer 2007, 16) from its current stagnation. Likely influenced by Schopenhauer, Wagner's antisemitic idea that Buddhism could somehow restore Christianity to its purest form is vital to understanding his decision to “translate” *Die Sieger* into *Parsifal*.

11 Despite being completed in 1859, *Tristan* was not performed until 1865.

counted by Burnouf,¹² Wagner experimented with sketches for an opera entitled *Die Sieger* (*The Conquerors*) from 1856 until his death in 1883. In brief, the story concerns a low-caste woman, Prakriti (Savitri in later sketches), who is tormented by love for the Buddha's favorite disciple, the Brahmin Ānanda, and pleads to be united with him, only to learn from the Buddha that her present agony is the karmic retribution for her callous treatment of a similarly love-tormented, low-caste suitor in a previous Brahmin birth. The Buddha explains that she must expiate her misdeeds through renunciation, joining Ānanda in chastity in the Buddhist order as a spiritual sister. Her transcendence of the will and initiation into the *sangha* occurs as the Buddha gives his final teachings and finally passes into *parinirvāṇa*: his originally reluctant allowance of a woman into the order is the condition for his own, final transcendence.¹³

Despite Wagner's sustained enthusiasm for the ideas he found in his Buddhist source material, *Die Sieger* never proceeded beyond the sketches. Interestingly, he seems to have left the work unrealized not due to the challenge of expressing *nirvāṇa* musically—which he seems to have faced head-on *Tristan*, for instance—but to another aesthetic issue: his anxiety over the potentially cheapening effects of directly portraying “exotic” Asia. Richard and Cosima Wagner's writings reveal the composer's xenophobic ambivalence toward the “unartistic” trappings of his Asian sources, suggesting his desire to free a Buddhist “essence” from what he considered to be aesthetically stultifying foreign packaging.¹⁴

The concrete figure of Śākyamuni Buddha, then, with all his exotic accoutrements, never fully emerges onto the Wagnerian stage. Yet, as Welbon (1968, 178), Kienzle (2007, 40), App (2011, 49), and Buschinger (2017, 36) have shown, Wagner himself considered his final completed work, *Parsifal*, to embody the musical and spiritual values of his original Buddhist project in supposedly essentialized—in fact Europeanized—form.¹⁵ In this “Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage” (*Bühnenweihfestspiel*), a sheltered young man of noble family, Parsifal, must renounce his past and expiate his own youthful misdeeds to redeem a fallen ascetic order, which he has been prophesied to one day lead. The young seeker absolves himself and the community of Grail Knights through his progressive attainment of compassionate wisdom, particularly through his relationship with the tormented woman Kundry, who is trapped in a series of painful rebirths for having laughed at the Redeemer on the cross.¹⁶ “By pity made wise,” Parsifal comes into his own redemptive power in an increasingly intense series

12 Urs App (2011, 177) identifies the tale as having been excerpted from a collection of hagiographical episodes titled *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*.

13 The precise relationship between Burnouf's account and Wagner's reworking is detailed by Buschinger (2017, 33–38).

14 Dorothy M. Figueira's (1994, 109) discussion of Cosima's diary entries from 1881 provide insight into Wagner's reticence toward “mango trees and lotuses and such.”

15 The opera loosely adapts Wolfram von Eschenbach's 13th-century Middle High German romance, *Parzival*, itself likely an adaptation of the French *Perceval* of Chrétien de Troyes.

16 Echoes of Prakriti/Savitri's narrative arc are clear, and even amplified, through Wagner's Christian “translation.”

of awakenings that conclude with his healing of Kundry, his consecration as leader of the Grail Society, and her final passage beyond rebirth. Despite its setting in the waste-forests of medieval Europe and its oblique incorporation of Christian mythology, *Die Sieger's* Buddhist vision of redeeming wisdom-through-compassion is unmistakable here.

As a text, *Parsifal's* suffusion with the “sublime” ideals of redemptive compassion and release in *nirvāṇa* is clear. Yet Wagner also crafted this outline into music-theatrical performances that could stir the emotions—and ideally the spirituality—of his audience, a majority of whom were likely unfamiliar with Buddha, Schopenhauer, and Burnouf. Musically, Kienzle (2007) and Brillenburg Wurth (2009) have both characterized climactic moments in Wagner’s mature works in terms of temporal slippage; consistent with his stated ideals of the musically sublime, Wagner deploys sonic “fragments floating in a-tactical harmonic sequences that are no longer (completely) determined by predictable tonal dynamics but that cut short the sense of time progressing in a rigidly balanced environment” (Brillenburg Wurth 88). Set within Wagner’s already disorienting “endless melody” (*unendliche Melodie*), the effect of these departures from traditional rhythmic and tonal progression is a sustained deprivation of the listener’s sense of overview, or notion of what comes next: a simulation of timelessness.

In *Parsifal*, such musical moments mark climactic transformations in the heroes’ inner realities and are accompanied in performance by dramatic shifts in staging. In Act I, as a Grail Knight informs Parsifal that “here, time becomes space,” a sacred forest is transformed by means of a lengthy musical passage (*Verwandlungsmusik*) and movable stage decorations (*Wandeldekoration*) into the cavernous Grail Temple. Act II reaches its climactic “slippage” when Kundry, empowered by Parsifal’s ardent vision of the suffering Redeemer, becomes able to recall her past lives and primordial sin; these nearly simultaneous musical ruptures meanwhile reveal the act’s seductive garden setting to be a sorcerer’s illusion, which promptly dissolves. Finally, Parsifal’s redemption of the Grail community in Act III restores a ruined wasteland to health as Kundry achieves her final release from rebirth: according to Danuser, Wagner composed the finale to simultaneously resolve a multitude of “agitated” motifs operative throughout the drama, such that ultimately “prayer and redemption are thus suspended—trembling yet at rest—in a single space” (1994, 78).

Assisting these sublime musical elements are the technical innovations of mature Wagnerian music-drama—the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*)—which would have transformed the performance of *Parsifal* into an unprecedentedly absorbing, even overwhelming aesthetic event for late-nineteenth-century audiences. In his theatre at Bayreuth, for instance, Wagner created a “mystic abyss” beneath the stage, in which the orchestra was hidden from view, creating the astonishing illusion of sourceless sound. He had dimmable electric lights in-

stalled in the hall, such that the stage—also lit with vivid electric light—was the only plainly visible part of the interior. Such techniques intended to induce the audience's total deliverance from the technical realities of the performance and a consequent surrender to and absorption within its idealized surfaces. This "phantasmagoric," almost totalitarian technique was famously criticized by Theodor Adorno (2009, 74–85) as the predecessor of cinema, and is clearly reminiscent of Longinus's (Roberts 1907, 97) remarks on the use of poetic figures in sublime literature: namely, that the reader should remain unaware that the poet has used any techniques at all. From its foundations in his post-Romantic theory of the musically sublime and its relation to *nirvāṇic* transcendence to its specific musical and proto-cinematic techniques, Wagner crafted *Parsifal* to evoke overwhelming affective responses from its audiences, indeed to involve them in experiences of timelessness and placelessness. It specifically engineered the Buddhist material Wagner had gleaned from Burnouf into an opportunity for late-nineteenth-century European audiences to feel intensely, with ideally spiritual consequences.

Beyond the above effects, Wagner's final work involves one further, important element I wish to characterize as sublime, namely, the disappearance of the Buddha as a distinct presence from the work, or the indeterminacy of *Parsifal*'s Buddhist origins in its performance. Despite its spectacular staging, Wagner's ultimate treatment of its source material is implicit and suggestive at most: *Parsifal* disappears the Buddha. Motivated as this may have been by the composer's xenophobia, the suffusion—or indeed the sublimation—of the explicitly Buddhist opera *Die Sieger* into this ostensibly different presentation has the peculiar, emotionally compelling effect of a haunting; the sense that *Parsifal* is the worldly echo of a reality that itself has passed into "the land of being no longer," as Wagner described *nirvāṇa*. It is notable that although Christian mythology is more vividly represented in *Parsifal* than Buddhist, it too is withheld from explicit presence: neither God, Christ, nor any other Christian figures are ever mentioned by name, and Parsifal himself ultimately takes on the role of "the Redeemer" (*Erlöser*). I characterize this double disappearance, this haunting silence of Buddha and Christ at the heart of *Parsifal* as sublime in that it resonates with Longinus's comments on the sublimity of wordlessness,¹⁷ Brillenburg Wurth's (2009) identification of the sublime with indeterminacy, and Wagner's own statement, from his 1861 essay "Music of the Future" (*Zukunftsmusik*): "The poet's greatness is mostly to be measured by what he leaves unsaid, letting us breathe in silence to ourselves the thing unspeakable; the musician it is who brings this untold mystery to clarion tongue" (1995, 344). The Buddha exerts an astonishing power within Wagner's final work precisely as an absence, without speaking a word. While this half-presence may not have been immediately evi-

¹⁷ "Sublimity is the echo of a great soul.' Hence also a bare idea, by itself and without a spoken word, sometimes excites admiration just because of the greatness of soul implied" (Roberts 1907, 61).

dent to Wagner's late-nineteenth-century audiences, the similarly compelling, unnerving half-presence of Christ in *Parsifal* was. It is precisely what prompted Stéphane Mallarmé, probably in line with Wagner (Badiou 210, 147), to understand *Parsifal* as a ceremony transcending the inert dogmas of the past, sublime in its own, evidently boundless form; a hopeful harbinger of the unmoored spirituality of the future.

4 *The Light of Asia*

Wagner has been the chief example in this case study not merely because of his cunning appropriations of the discourse of sublime genius or his self-consciously Buddhist elaborations of the musically sublime, but also because of the abundance of literature proceeding from him. The extensive critical engagement with Wagner's life and work both empower this essay and make it vulnerable to a certain parochialism. Wagner is no doubt unavoidable and important, yet a comprehensive outline of the "Buddhist sublime" in western music demands we acknowledge—if only as a brief, revealing counterpoint—the very different achievement of his less-remembered American contemporary, Dudley Buck (1839-1909).

A well-known church organist and prolific composer, Buck trained in German conservatories but was predominantly active in New England, within a musical milieu whose great contemporary popularity has been forgotten today largely due to its stylistic conservatism (Orr 2008, xi). In 1886, Buck completed his most extensive work: an adaptation of Edwin Arnold's 1879 epic-poetic retelling of the Buddha's biography,¹⁸ *The Light of Asia*, for large choral-orchestral ensemble, tenor, soprano, and bass, in the oratorio form made popular by Handel during the previous century.¹⁹ In the "sentimental history" of Buddhism in the west, Arnold's poem deserves considerable attention: according to Droit (2003, 157), it exemplifies a late-nineteenth-century shift in the western suspicion of (Schopenhauerian) Buddhist "nihilism" to an optimistic celebration of the Buddha's moral message, palatable to an increasingly secularized Victorian bourgeoisie. Arnold's poem was a global bestseller, popular in great part for its compelling yet reassuringly familiar style, which eschewed poetic innovation and emulated the "sublime" English poets that Handel himself had been compared to, along with Arnold's Victorian contemporaries Tennyson and Longfellow. Buck's decision to adapt *The Light of Asia* for music appears to have had less to do with a personal investment in Buddhism than a perceived opportunity to reinforce musically the moral values and aesthetic excitement that Arnold had so

¹⁸ Based loosely on the *Lalitavistarasūtra*.

¹⁹ Arnold's poem also inspired the English composer Isidore de Lara to compose an opera, *La Luce dell'Asia* (1892), which debuted at Covent Garden but seems to have enjoyed less success than Buck's work.

effectively stirred in his audience: as Buck's biographer N. Lee Orr (2003, 415; 432) suggests, his adaptation conforms to both the Victorian conviction in the morally strengthening social influence of choral music and an "antimodern" orientalism, popular in late-nineteenth-century America, that "yearned for pious simplicity and a lost innocence... to counter the weightlessness of contemporary life."

Buck's approach is thus ideologically and stylistically conservative. If *Parsifal's* philosophical and technical inventiveness represent Wagner's "music of the future," then *The Light of Asia* represents a deliberate, reactionary turning against the aesthetic currents of modernism, toward historical precedent, not for the stimulation of the art-cult but for the edification of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Although Buck experiments here with Wagnerian *Leitmotiv*, *The Light of Asia* follows the formal parameters of Handelian oratorio. It speaks a more accessible, semantic musical language, hearkening to a time before Beethoven's "ineffable" musical messaging, aiming more at evoking its audience's enjoyment and understanding than blowing their minds. His approach proved popular enough: *The Light of Asia* was distributed as a piano score even before its stage debut and toured major concert halls of the United States and England in the late 1880s to some acclaim.

Although *The Light of Asia's* scale and its textual and musical pedigrees suggest the larger-than-life affective impression that the work intends, its goal is not to dissolve the self in musical experiences of formlessness, *pace* Wagner, but to invigorate the community by triumphally amplifying their sense of tradition and shared moral beliefs. Reflecting this conservatism and suggesting the light impression it would make on music-historical memory, reviews of *The Light of Asia's* 1889 London performances comment rather nonchalantly on its irresistible charm and simultaneous lack of "strong character" (Orr 2008, 98).

Despite these divergences from Wagnerian music-drama, I submit that *The Light of Asia* lays just as valid a claim to the sublime in its clear invocation of Handelian grandeur and its evident conviction in this aesthetic's "elevating" power. Wagner did not hold a monopoly on the sublime at the end of the nineteenth century, and the disparities between his and Buck's approaches reveal the flexible capabilities and consequences of this aesthetic category; in 1886, it could encompass both Wagner's heady aesthetic program and Buck's populist triumphalism. Moreover, although Buck himself may not have been as moved by Buddhism as Wagner, his setting of Arnold's already affectively charged Buddhist text to music at once comfortable and emotionally rousing for his popular Victorian audience is perhaps even more immediately relevant to the "sentimental history" of Buddhism in the west than *Parsifal's* more oblique treatment. Regardless of its intentions or intellectual, artistic caliber, Buck's Buddhist composition transformed the life story and teachings of the Buddha into enjoyable, if not sensational, celebratory evenings at the concert hall for thousands of westerners during a period when popular impressions of the so-called Buddhist "culte

du néant” were barely free of the earlier nineteenth century’s charges of nihilism. Such appeals to popular taste and the comfortable, even desirable affects associated with them are doubtless essential to the west’s “discovery” and consumption of a benevolent Buddha. At the same time, the fact that *The Light of Asia*’s market-ready Buddhist sublime proved to be a less consumable product than *Parsifal*’s more abstract treatment is ironic.

One final point of comparison between Wagner’s and Buck’s Buddhist compositions suggests itself here. Whereas *Parsifal* abstracts the embodied presence of Buddha into its narrative, thematic, and musical configurations, the Buddha is in an important sense the focal point of Buck’s work: following Arnold’s poem almost verbatim, it tells his story explicitly. At the same time, however, *The Light of Asia* importantly resembles *Parsifal* in its refusal to stage the Buddha’s body—bound up as it troublingly was with fleshy foreignness. Although the score calls for soloists to sing the words of Buddha and other characters, these are consistently presented by the soloists not as direct speech but as quotations, and in any case are refracted and deepened by the chorus, which carries the omniscient perspective of Arnold’s epic narrator. The Buddha’s presence here is narrated from afar, given in quotations, deflected into sound, and sonically diffused amidst a massive ensemble. By writing an oratorio, which in performance visually presents only a European orchestra, choir, and soloists, Buck, too, avoided having to present the “mango trees and lotuses” of Asia, maintaining a tolerable degree of exoticism but assimilating the Buddha to more elevated, Victorian aesthetic standards. Though *The Light of Asia* tells the story of the Buddha, its deflection of his presence into rousing, sublime sounds basically communicates the attitude that—much more than his body and even more than his ideas—what really matters is how he makes us—or can be made to make us—*feel*. In many ways at the antipodes of *Parsifal*, the *Light of Asia*’s treatment of Buddhist narrative is similarly disembodied. Is this vanishing trick—like *Parsifal*’s—sublime?

5 Gone?

In their very different attempts to adapt Buddhist source material to western music, both Wagner and Buck subjected the Buddha to a strange placelessness. On one hand, as is clear at least from Wagner’s remarks, this ambiguous presencing has something to do with a xenophobic anxiety over representing Asia directly: invoking the exotic phenomenal circumstances of Śākyamuni Buddha’s life was felt to somehow cheapen the “sublime” conceptual content of his teaching, which both composers seem to have held would be powerfully relevant to western culture—if only its essential effects could be liberated from their distracting Indic embodiments. Perhaps the first thing that *Parsifal* and *The Light of Asia* suggest to us is that if the Buddha were to teach, persuasively, in the con-

cert halls of the late-nineteenth-century west, his performance would need to involve both vanishing acts and ventriloquism. In other words, he would need to disappear into the music: itself a sublime transformation.

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse on the sublime in music laid the groundwork for such “freeing” effects. Through the strangely abstract, disembodied quality of music—specifically as it had been shaped by Romantic philosophizing—the Buddha would be able to bypass his embodiment and convey the ineffable content of his teaching appropriately wordlessly, or at least in the rarified, immaterial realm of pure sound; to vanish from material being and thereby speak all the clearer, directly to our feelings. Although both *Parsifal* and *The Light of Asia* involve text, and explicit Buddhist teachings in the case of the latter, their settings to “sublime” music entail the words becoming less vehicles of semantic meaning than opportunities to project ineffable feeling (or at least feelings that were marketable to European concertgoers).

Indeed, both works suggest that for Wagner and Buck, knowing about Buddhism in the way of those who had “discovered” it was insufficient to an authentic engagement—or experience—of the material. Their recourse to musical feeling intended that their western audiences should be granted a kind of deeper, more personal access to or initiation into Buddhism than they would be able to receive in the publications of Burnouf, Koeppen, of Max Müller. Such emphasis on affective *experience* as a legitimate mode of engaging Buddhism has, perhaps through mediations such as these, become characteristic of Buddhism’s western elaborations, often in close relationship to the dynamic of “detraditionalization”: we see both operating vigorously in Wagner’s and Buck’s works, which present Buddhism—unmoored from any orthodoxy—directly to subjective feeling. Although the distinction between knowing and feeling is never absolute, or even clear, the two composers’ development of a Buddhist sublime through music thus suggests that what happened between Buddhism and western culture through the long nineteenth century involved, alongside “discovery,” “curation,” and so on an affective and in no small part musical *attunement*—of Buddhism to western audiences and vice versa.

If the western “experience” of Buddhism was shaped by the aesthetics of the sublime, we should finally consider the possibility that this affective attunement exerted its own influence in the development of western aesthetics in the twentieth century. Characteristic of much Romantic art is a yearning gesturing toward a “beyond,” either of something irretrievably lost or transcending the work’s phenomenal surface: Wagner’s and Buck’s works, however problematic their motivations, follow suit by pointing to the presence of a figure who nonetheless is absented from concrete presentation. Although both composers were likely unaware of Buddhist debates on the Buddha’s continued existence following his *parinirvāṇa*, *Parsifal*’s haunted “ceremony of the future” and Buck’s quotational, disembodied evocation of the Buddha can be interpreted as aesthetic sugges-

tions of the Buddha's own irresolvable absence/presence in the world. Gone, his presence flickers in the music, which by its own nature as sound is both "there" and not there. At least in Wagner's work, there is a self-conscious attempt to emphasize the ontological instability of sound: grandiose, his sounds point at the same time to their own passage and ultimate dissolution, in musical configurations Wagner explicitly associated with sublime *nirvāṇa*.

Although she neglects the Buddhist undercurrent, Brillenburg Wurth (2009) suggests that Wagner's development of the "musically sublime" helps complicate the distinction between Romantic and postmodern sublimes discussed by Jean-Francois Lyotard (1991). Wagner's music gestures Romantically at a "beyond" while also emphasizing the astonishing indeterminacy of the very medium being presented *now*—the "immanent sublime" which Lyotard finds in many works of the twentieth-century avant-garde. As Brillenburg Wurth (2009, 130–131) points out, this immanent sublime is epitomized by American composer John Cage's (1912–1992) landmark 1952 composition 4'33", in which presence and absence fully interpenetrate in the riveting sonic indeterminacy of a performance in which no instrument is played. Cage, who attended D.T. Suzuki's lectures at Columbia in the early 1950s, articulates in distinctly Zen-inflected language in his "Lecture on Something" (1959) an approach to composition that draws attention to the nonduality of sound and silence, "so that listening to this music one / takes as a springboard the first sound that comes along; the first / something springs us into nothing and out of that nothing arises the / next something; etc. like an eternal current. Not one sound fears / the silence that extinguishes it. And no silence exists that is not pregnant with sound" (Cage 1999, 135). Although Cage was likely uninterested in Wagner's music and Romantic ideology generally, the resonance between the two composer's musical engagements with Buddhism and the development that these engagements have entailed in the western aesthetic discourse of the sublime is considerable. Through the turn of the twentieth century and evidently beyond, Buddhism seems to have encouraged in western art and aesthetics an exploration of ambiguity as a sublime force.

Acknowledging the entanglement of Buddhism with western approaches to sublime feeling now leads us back to a question we should have asked from the beginning: how did Buddhists in Asia prior to the nineteenth century understand and discuss the aesthetic dimensions of the Dharma?

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