

**“Wirkungen, nicht Werke”:  
The Musical Aesthetics and Influence of Herder’s *Kalligone***

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## I Introduction

Over two centuries after its appearance in 1800, Johann Gottfried Herder's late magnum opus *Kalligone* remains an obscure and ambiguous work. Rafael Köhler, writing in 1996, touts *Kalligone* as Herder's "*summa aesthetica*, the fruit of decades of aesthetic reflection," for which Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the work's polemical target, provided "merely the external motivation."<sup>1</sup> Robert Norton, on the other hand, in his 1991 book *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment*, dismisses *Kalligone* as an "ill-fated attack on Kant's aesthetic theory," which "does not...represent any appreciable theoretical advancement of the ideas that Herder had developed a quarter of a century before."<sup>2</sup> More vexing than such controversies is the simple fact that Herder's treatise remains a closed book to English-speaking audiences: in what can only be called a scandal for Anglophone scholars of German aesthetics and philosophy, *Kalligone* has never been translated into English, though it is uncertain whether this is due more to the perceived irrelevance of the book or to the difficult quality of its prose, at once turgid and lyrical.

In this paper I attempt to address both the internal argumentation and the external impact of *Kalligone* with regard to the aesthetics of music. First, I examine Herder's treatment of music in *Kalligone* in the context of his attack on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790. I summarize Herder's objections to Kant and attempt to outline his own highly idiosyncratic philosophy of music. In the second part I present a brief case study in the reception of *Kalligone* in the years immediately following its publication, focusing on the writings of Christian Friedrich Michaelis, who attempted to mediate between the musical philosophies of Herder and Kant. As I hope to show, Herder's ideas were quick to enter the discourse of music aesthetics in the early nineteenth century. While much of his thought can be easily reconciled with the established narrative of nascent Romanticism circa 1800, some aspects of Herder's influence brush provocatively against the grain of this standard model.

## II Herder's critique of Kant's musical aesthetics in *Kalligone*

One of the most profound differences between the musical aesthetics of Kant and Herder lies in their varying understandings of the sensation and perception of musical sound. Although such Kantian notions as non-representative “free beauty” are amenable to musically sympathetic readings, Kant’s assessment of music in the *Critique of Judgment* is generally unflattering. Because it “merely plays with sensations” and “produces only a *transitory* impression,” music is given the third and lowest aesthetic rank “in reason’s judgment,” below the verbal and visual arts. The cognition aroused by sonorous forms being “merely the effect of a mechanical association,” music is, in Kant’s classic phrase, “more enjoyment than culture.”<sup>3</sup> Sound, like color, is for Kant the expression of underlying mathematical and formal relations, but because these are not perceptible on the surface of sensation, so to speak, the products of these media are compromised as objects of aesthetic judgment.<sup>4</sup>

Kant’s suspicion about music’s aesthetic legitimacy, then, is the product of basic, underlying notions about the medium of sound. Sound is transitory, for it lacks both the concepts of poetry and the enduring images of visual art. Even while we do perceive it, it is of dubious value from the standpoint of aesthetic judgment, because its sensuous effect is of greater salience than its formal structure. And finally, sound impinges on the freedom of those who listen to it: it affects us not by activating the free play of the faculties, but rather by means of the “mechanical” workings of external forces upon our bodies—this is the famous “lack of urbanity” for which Kant reproached music, its ability to rudely impose itself upon the listener.<sup>5</sup>

Just as Kant’s problems with music seem to center on the perceived deficiencies of sound as a vehicle of aesthetic content, Herder’s critique of Kant in *Kalligone* has less to do with music as an art form than it does with the properties of the acoustic medium. This

focus on the particular sensory dynamics at work in the various arts is typical of Herder's anti-systematic, empirical approach to aesthetics, and his desire, as he states in the foreword to *Kalligone*, "to throw off the oppression of categorical despotism, without applying a new linguistic yoke."<sup>6</sup> As early as his first and fourth of his *Kritische Wälder*, written around 1769, Herder had argued that aesthetics, as the science of perception, must attune itself to distinctions between perceptual modes operative in different artistic media.<sup>7</sup> As Rafael Köhler writes, "[For Herder] the recognition of beauty stands at the end of a chain of cognitive and sensory activities; it is the result of a mental process on the basis of sensual perception. With this notion of *aesthetics from below* Herder opposes the prevalent approach of contemporary aesthetics, which he calls *aesthetics from above*, and criticizes for attempting to arrive at beauty through a predetermined concept."<sup>8</sup> Herder argues that Kant's overwrought philosophical apparatus deafens him to the actual aesthetic workings of music: instead of starting with the perception of sound, Kant begins with *a priori* definitions of the act of aesthetic judgment that essentially determine the outcome before the judgment is even made. It is thus a reconceptualization of the nature of musical sound and sensation that allows Herder to turn the tables on Kant's critique of music.

He begins by countering Kant's claims about the mechanical effect of music. Kant held that our response to music is determined solely by the sounding stimulus. In listening to music, he suggested, we are deprived of that exercise of imaginative freedom that is the essence of aesthetic judgment. Herder refutes this charge by locating the feelings aroused by music in the sympathetic resonance of the sensitive listener. "The sensations [*Empfindungen*] of music," he writes, quoting from the *Critique of Judgment*, "are not 'generated from outside,' but rather in us, in us; from outside comes only the sweet, all-moving sound, which, being harmonically and melodically produced, itself harmonically and melodically stirs those who are susceptible to it."<sup>9</sup> Herder argues that sound is an

expression of the essential nature of the body that emits is. He refutes the notion of an “empty sound,” since “every sound is *expressive*...it is the expression of something internal, it affects [*bewegt*] something internal.”<sup>10</sup>

Do not all bodies emit a *sound* when they are struck and made to reproduce themselves elastically? Is there not a medium that takes up this sound, carries it forth, and conveys it to other harmonious bodies? What is sound therefore but the *voice of all agitated bodies, projected out from within? Declaring, softly or loudly, to other harmonious beings their suffering, their resistance, their agitated energies.*<sup>11</sup>

Herder’s aesthetics are fundamentally naturalistic: while Kant’s philosophy is designed to bridge an assumed chasm between humanity and nature, Herder posits these as an unbroken unity. “The concordance of objects with our faculties, the harmony between our faculties and objects, does not point beyond but rather holds us within the boundaries of nature.”<sup>12</sup> Again and again Herder returns to the image of the listening subject as a “harmonious [or harmonic] being”; in listening to musical sound, we are made to resonate with the acoustic emanations of the surrounding world. Strikingly, Herder takes up Kant’s mechanical metaphor, but inverts its message: “Music plays upon a clavichord within us, which is our innermost nature.”<sup>13</sup> Music does indeed work upon us as a musician upon her instrument, but for Herder this is without any suggestion of mechanistic manipulation. Our receptivity to sound is evidence of our rootedness in the natural, phenomenal world.

The faculty of hearing attunes us to a world of sympathetic vibrations. Sound, like light, suffuses the world of experience, and to complain of it being an external imposition on our senses is as absurd as to lament the fact that we are constantly beset with visual stimuli. Indeed, in what could be called his musical pantheism, Herder owes more to the speculative writings of the seventeenth-century scholar Athanasius Kircher than to the predominant visualism of Enlightenment aesthetics. In the dialogue that leads into one of the discussions of sound in *Kalligone* (Part 1, Section 3: “Vom schönen und Angenehmen der Umrisse, Farben, und Töne”), one of the three unnamed characters demurs at entering into the

domain of the ear: “[Sound is] for me a gloomy world. In it disappear not only corporeal forms, but also outlines, figures, space and light itself. We are descending into the underworld.” Another character, presumably speaking in Herder’s voice, bids him to take heart: “We shall be accompanied by the golden bough, the sacred flame, and the lyre of Orpheus. We are entering the realm of tones—indeed an *invisible* world; but what have we lost? Nothing but the outwardness [Äußerlichkeiten] of things: form, outline, figure, space; through these we experience but little of inwardness, and this little only through a return to ourselves. This inwardness, our *feeling*, remains to us.”<sup>14</sup>

In response to Kant’s claim that music’s effects are “merely transitory” and thus inferior to the more lasting impressions of poetry and painting, Herder concedes the point but disputes Kant’s conclusion. Herder reframes the ephemerality of music as a positive value whose incessant motion is thought to mirror the never-ending flux of human feeling:

*Transitory* is every instant of this art, and must be so: for its *meaning*, its *impression* consists in precisely the *shorter* and *longer*, *stronger* and *weaker*, *higher* and *lower*, *more* and *less*. In alighting and taking flight, in becoming and having been—here lies the triumphant power of tone and feeling.<sup>15</sup>

This passage contains one of the most emphatic statements of Herder’s aesthetics of movement: music is depicted here not as the medium of presentation for a determinate emotional or intellectual content, but rather as the fleeting play of interdependent quanta of energy. Its meaning (*Bedeutung*), Herder states, is synonymous with its impression (*Eindruck*)—the very quality whose ephemerality was for Kant the cause of music’s aesthetic deficiency. Already in the first of the *Kritische Wällder*, Herder had evoked Aristotle’s distinction between *ergon* (work) and *energeia* (activity, working) in order to differentiate between art forms that produce physical objects and those that produce actions.<sup>16</sup> In *Kalligone* he reiterates this dichotomy, cleverly transposing the etymological kinship between *ergon* and *energeia* into the German pair *Werk* and *Wirkung*. “The product of all transitory arts is *effects*, not works [*Wirkungen*, nicht *Werke*].”<sup>17</sup> While many of

Herder's contemporaries were celebrating music as a "language above language," he staked music's claim to aesthetic dignity on its experiential transience.<sup>18</sup> Not ineffability, but ephemerality is the watchword of Herder's revaluation of music.

### III *Kalligone's* progeny: Herder's influence on Christian Friedrich Michaelis

Having attempted to sketch the contours of Herder's aesthetics of music as presented in *Kalligone*, I now turn to a brief case study in order to demonstrate the work's influence in the immediate wake of its publication. Christian Friedrich Michaelis, born in Leipzig in 1770, had absorbed Kantian philosophy during his university education in the late 1780s and early 1790s, and his first major work, *Über den Geist der Tonkunst (On the Spirit of Music)*, published beginning in 1795, bore the subtitle *Mit Rücksicht auf Kants Kritik der ästhetischen Urteilskraft (With Regard to Kant's Critique of the Faculty of Aesthetic Judgment)*. The extent of Kant's influence on Michaelis is also apparent in the article "On the Rank of Music among the Fine Arts," published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in December of 1799, in which Michaelis' language cleaves so closely to Kant as to border on plagiarism:

The *third* place is held by *music*, which affords the greatest *pleasure*, but the least *culture*, as it plays with mere *sensations*, which lead only to indefinite ideas of affects; with regard to the definiteness and purity of beautiful representation, music ranks behind the other arts; unlike them, it cannot ward off the meddling of pleasant or unpleasant sensual stimuli.<sup>19</sup>

But five years later, in August of 1804, Michaelis published an essay designated as a "supplement and qualification" to the earlier piece. In this text he reproduces almost verbatim his earlier statement on the rank of music among the fine arts, but with a crucial difference: this view is now openly attributed to Kant, and no sooner has Michaelis presented it than he emphatically distances himself from it, noting that it had been "rightly contested by modern aestheticians," and that "the admirers of music are none too willing to concede the claim of the philosopher from Königsberg, that music among all the arts affords

the least *culture*, and perceptive men of recent times have demonstrated the groundlessness of this disparagement of music.”<sup>20</sup> Among these “modern aestheticians” and “perceptive men” would no doubt have been included Johann Gottfried von Herder, whom Michaelis quotes approvingly (and at length) at the beginning of the article. As Lothar Schmidt notes in his edition of Michaelis’ musical writings, in 1801, if not sooner, Michaelis had come into contact with Herder’s aesthetics when he assisted the Leipzig professor Karl Adolph Cäsar in assembling an anthology of contemporary philosophical writings that included excerpts from *Kalligone*. Herder’s influence is apparent in all of Michaelis’ writings after 1801. In a series of essays published in various journals (including such prominent organs as the *Allgemeine Zeitung für Musik*) during the first two decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Michaelis established a unique and provocative aesthetic position, one that fused aspects of the seemingly diametrical positions of Herder and Kant: from the former he took a fascination with the ephemeral power of music, from the latter an enduring concern with the transcendental qualities of aesthetic experience. But while Michaelis’ debt to Kant is common knowledge, and is often cited as an example of the latter’s omnipresent influence on the thought of the time, Herder’s influence on Michaelis—and consequently, the entry of Herder’s ideas into early nineteenth-century musical discourse—has not yet properly been recognized.<sup>21</sup>

Although Michaelis’ musical writings cover a wide range of topics, he concerns himself at great length with the nature of sound, and it is here that we can perceive most vividly the competing influences of Herder and Kant. In his earlier writings, Michaelis labors to demonstrate the aesthetic dignity of musical sound, but his perspective remains essentially Kantian. In his treatise *On the Spirit of Music*, Michaelis had described the aesthetic idea as a force “by which music exalts itself above the fearful [ängstlichen] mechanism of its material components.”<sup>22</sup> After his encounter with *Kalligone*, however, Michaelis began to vacillate

between a lingering Kantian suspicion of the sonic medium and a Herderesque celebration of the embodied spirituality of sound. He borrowed freely from Herder's arguments, but imported them into a philosophical framework in which the Kantian dichotomy separating the internal/spiritual and the external/physical remains intact. This inevitably caused conceptual tension, since, as Paul Guyer has pointed out, "Herder rejects the traditional distinction between mind and body, arguing that mind is essentially connected to the bodily organs of sense."<sup>23</sup> Writing in 1801, just around the time of his reading of *Kalligone*, Michaelis stated that "tones affect firstly the senses; music has an immediate effect upon the body through the agitation of the nervous system." But this "merely *mechanical* or *physical* effect" gives way to the "*aesthetic* effect of music," as tones are "strung together by the imagination and inner sense [inneren Sinn]."<sup>24</sup> In this passage the mechanical and aesthetic effects of music are seen to follow closely on each other, but they remain nonetheless distinct.

In fact, Herder's influence was never strong enough to disabuse Michaelis of his dualism and his concomitant suspicion of the materiality of sound. Herder's invocations of the spiritual are bereft any implication of transcendence of the phenomenal world: the spiritual is for him simply the good, the life-enhancing. For Michaelis, however, the spiritual effects of music are always opposed to mere materiality: "We cannot accept sounds as constituents of the physical world interpreted by the sense of sight and touch. Sounds are to a certain extent incorporeal [etwas Unkörperliches], although they originate in bodies in motion; and just as spiritual things are invisible, so too are sounds."<sup>25</sup> The physicality of tones is thus banished back to the sounding body that emits them; as soon as they are let loose into the world, sounds shed their worldly fetters and enter the spiritual domain as potential objects of musical perception.

If his writings from the first years of the nineteenth century present elements of Herder and Kant in unreconciled proximity, in his later work Michaelis distanced himself from Herder's thought. In one of Michaelis' last published essays from 1818, there is some evidence that the tension between the influences of Herder and Kant had been resolved in favor of the latter.<sup>26</sup> Musical hearing, Michaelis now asserts, is not a matter of "mere *sense*," which is "confined to what is *singular* and *present*," but is rather the domain of the "*imagination* [*Einbildungskraft*], which is both engaged by the senses and related to the understanding."<sup>27</sup>

The imagination does not perceive and understand the singular, individual, and current, but rather beholds and contemplates the relationship of the one to the other, of the present to the past and future, of the individual to the whole, of the multifarious to the singular, in short, the *organic* determination of tones in time. Thus it is not material or mass—the stuff of sensation—but rather *form* (definition, figuration, formation, that which is perceptible only to the imagination in time [das allein der Einbildungskraft in der Zeit Anschauliche]) that constitutes the object of musical judgment.<sup>28</sup>

Here the role of the imagination, which gathers phenomena into formal configurations in order to render them fit for aesthetic judgment, betrays unmistakably the enduring influence of Kantian thinking. To be sure, form for Michaelis is no mere transposition of a visual category into a temporal art, but rather an attempt to reconcile the ephemerality of musical experience with the synthesizing power of the imagination. Indeed, Michaelis' concept of musical form is both a legacy and a corruption of Herder's influence: it seems at once to celebrate the ephemerality of music and to capture its movement through a cognitive mapping which eventuates in a singular form over which the listener stands in judgment.<sup>29</sup> Although the idea of form has an important place in Herder's treatment visual and tangible objects, he conceives of it not in opposition to material or content, but rather as encompassing the entirety of the aesthetic object. Form—or "living form," as Herder calls it, in distinction to "dead" or "empty" Kantian form without purpose or concept—cannot be separated, even analytically, from meaning and substance; it is rather for Herder "the

*essence* of the thing, in which the other conditions of its existence...come together as at the center. [...] Without spirit, every form is a shard.”<sup>30</sup> Thus it is fitting that while Kant is often thought to have opened the door to musical formalism, Herder, in one of the most remarkable passages in *Kalligone*, denies unequivocally the very possibility of musical form:

With regard to the sensations and even shapes that reach us through hearing, we cannot speak of the *fixed outlines* and *forms* presented by the eye, for in fact the ear never configures [its sensations] in a fixed manner. Even if tones could constitute forms or parts of forms, they would all last only briefly; each tone takes its form with it and buries it.<sup>31</sup>

#### **IV Conclusion**

Though Michaelis’ reception of Herder is an important part of the story, Herder’s impact on the aesthetics of music in the early nineteenth century needs to be further investigated. Those who fell under his influence would certainly include such figures as E.T.A. Hoffmann, in whose writings (one notices after reading *Kalligone*) Herderian tropes abound. Such a re-examination would also likely complicate the story of musical Romanticism in productive ways: as Rafael Köhler notes, Herder’s aesthetics cannot be related to principles of imitation or expression as they are generally understood.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, his position with regard to musicology as it was taking shape around 1800 can only be described as fraught: if the discipline was born in the later nineteenth century from the confluence of philosophical idealism, formalistic analysis, and an emergent work concept, Herder’s unique contribution to the field may have been nothing so much as an attempt to kill the infant musicology in its crib. But whatever his historical role, it is Herder’s relevance for contemporary thought that I would like to emphasize in closing. Less concerned with music in the narrow sense than with opening our ears to the “hall of eternal harmonies” that is the world in which we live, Herder’s musical writings can be seen to anticipate many recent transdisciplinary developments that center around the effort to understand and celebrate the ear as an organ of experience, knowledge, and pleasure. Above all, Herder points toward the possibility of a

musical discourse which addresses its object as lived experience. If his demand that we speak of music in worldly, experiential terms strikes us as deliberately naïve or even anti-intellectual, perhaps this is only a measure of the extent to which we are still under the Kantian spell.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rafael Köhler, "Christian Friedrich Michaelis zwischen Herder und Kant," in *Natur und Geist. Energetische Form in der Musiktheorie* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1996), 55.

<sup>2</sup> Robert E. Norton, *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 117, 234.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 196-200 (§53).

<sup>4</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 194.

<sup>5</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 198-200.

<sup>6</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Kalligone*, ed. Heinz Begenu (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1955), viii.

<sup>7</sup> See Paul Guyer, "Free Play and True Well-Being: Herder's Critique of Kant's Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65:4 (Fall 2007), 354-56

<sup>8</sup> Rafael Köhler, "Johann Gottfried Herder und die Überwindung der musikalischen Nachahmungsästhetik," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 52:3 (1995), 209.

<sup>9</sup> Herder, *Kalligone*, 146.

<sup>10</sup> Herder, *Kalligone*, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Herder, *Kalligone*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Herder, *Kalligone*, 276.

<sup>13</sup> Herder, *Kalligone*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Herder, *Kalligone*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Herder, *Kalligone*, 152.

<sup>16</sup> See Köhler, "Johann Gottfried Herder und die Überwindung der musikalischen Nachahmungsästhetik," 215.

<sup>17</sup> Herder, *Kalligone*, 95. This formulation is intended as a direct refutation of the following claim made by Kant: "Art is distinguished from *nature* as doing (*facere*) is from acting or operating in general (*agere*); and the product or result of art is distinguished from that of nature, the first being a work (*opus*), the second an effect (*effectus*)." (*Critique of Judgment*, 170)

<sup>18</sup> See Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 63.

<sup>19</sup> I have based all my translations of Michaelis' original German from the anthology *Christian Friedrich Michaelis: Ueber den Geist der Tonkunst und andere Schriften*, ed. Lothar Schmidt (Chemnitz: Gudrun Schröder Verlag, 1997). Schmidt, 148: "Den dritten Rang nimmt die *Tonkunst* ein, welche den größten *Genuss*, aber für sich die wenigste *Kultur* gewährt, indem sie mit blossen *Empfindungen* spielt, die nur auf unbestimmte Ideen von Affekten führen; auch steht sie, in Ansehung der Bestimmtheit und Reinheit schöner Darstellung, den anderen Künsten nach, indem sie die Einmischung angenehmer oder unangenehmer Sinnesreize nicht so, wie die anderen Künste, abhalten kann."

<sup>20</sup> Schmidt, 189.

<sup>21</sup> Lothar Schmidt notes that Michaelis and others had in 1801 reproduced excerpts from *Kalligone*, which they, in their own words, "purified of troublesome polemical disfigurements." Schmidt asserts that Michaelis "did not subscribe to Herder's fundamental critique of Kant." (357) In his editorial afterword to a modern anthology of Michaelis' writings, Schmidt omits any consideration of Herder. Rafael Köhler, on the other hand, insightfully places Michaelis "between Kant and Herder": see his *Natur und Geist: Energetische Form in der Musiktheorie*, 55-65. Tellingly, there is no mention of Herder in the article on Michaelis in the MGG, even though the author cites Schmidt's edition of Michaelis' writings.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Köhler, "Christian Friedrich Michaelis zwischen Herder und Kant," 60.

<sup>23</sup> Guyer, 355.

<sup>24</sup> Schmidt, 180.

<sup>25</sup> Schmidt, 249-250; translated in Le Huray and Day, 286. I have adjusted le Huray and Day's translation.

<sup>26</sup> On this matter, see Köhler, "Christian Friedrich Michaelis zwischen Herder und Kant," 64.

<sup>27</sup> Schmidt, 272.

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<sup>28</sup> Schmidt, 272: “Denn hier wird nicht das Einzelne, Individuelle, Gegenwärtige bloß einzeln empfunden und aufgefaßt, sondern das Verhältniß des Einen zum Anderen, des Gegenwärtigen zum Vergangenen und Künftigen, des Einzelnen zum Ganzen, des Mannigfaltigen zum Einen, kurz die *organische* Bestimmung der Töne in der Zeit, innerlich angeschaut und erwogen. Demnach macht nicht sowohl die Materie oder Masse, der Stoff der Empfindung, sondern die *Form* (die Begrenzung, Gestaltung, Bildung, das allein der Einbildungskraft in der Zeit Anschauliche) den Gegenstand der musikalische Beurteilung aus.”

<sup>29</sup> “In his formulation of a static autonomy aesthetic, which emphasizes the work-character of music, Michaelis can legitimately be regarded as a predecessor of Eduard Hanslick.” (Köhler, “Christian Friedrich Michaelis zwischen Herder und Kant,” 62)

<sup>30</sup> Herder, *Kalligone*, 72; see also 158.

<sup>31</sup> Herder, *Kalligone*, 228.

<sup>32</sup> Köhler, “Johann Gottfried Herder und die Überwindung der musikalischen Nachahmungsästhetik,” 206.



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