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# Adorno on music: a reconsideration

Gary Zabel

The role allotted to music in the history of Western philosophy has been exceedingly thin. When philosophers have attempted to make sense of aesthetic experience, they have turned far more frequently to visual and literary works of art. Since pure music is not capable of any representational function as it is not 'about' anything, it is very distant from the conceptual idiom with which philosophers have felt most comfortable. On the whole, the few exceptions to such neglect prove the general rule. Plato considered music in several of his Dialogues, but solely as an instrument of the education of moral character in the ideal political state. Schopenhauer devoted important sections of *The World as Will and Representation* to music, but he was interested in musical phenomena only to the extent that they substantiated his peculiar metaphysical doctrine of blind striving as the ground of existence. Nietzsche accorded music a central role in his philosophy, but only insofar as it was able to evoke the Dionysian revel that he sought to reintroduce into European culture. In each case, music was subordinated to an extrinsic philosophical purpose rather than considered on its own unique and demanding terms.

Theodor Adorno broke this long tradition of neglect and external interpretation. Undoubtedly, an extensive musical background prepared the way for his achievement. Adorno was instilled with an early love for music by his mother, Maria Cavelli-Adorno, a professional singer, and her unmarried sister, Agathe, a successful pianist. From childhood he learned the piano with Bernard Sekles, also the teacher of Hindemith. Adorno continued his musical education at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, taking courses in music while working on his doctorate in philosophy. In 1924, at the age of 21, he attended a performance of excerpts from Alban Berg's new opera, *Wozzeck*, by which, as he later wrote, he was 'overcome'. Through the intercession of a mutual friend, the conductor of the performance, Hermann Scherchen, Adorno persuaded Berg to take him on as a student in Vienna. On arriving in the Austrian capital following the completion of his doctorate, Adorno entered the circle of innovative composers around

Arnold Schoenberg, whose early work he continued to champion for the rest of his life. Although he had serious aspirations as a composer, Adorno was not prolific, and had considerable difficulty getting his compositions performed. He was vastly more successful writing about music than creating it. From 1928 to 1932 he assumed the editorship of the Viennese journal *Anbruch*, organ of the 'new music' of the Schoenberg circle. Until his death, he wrote as a music critic for the newspapers, music journals, and for radio. Of the twenty-three volumes of his collected writings, more than half are devoted to music, notable among them being a series of monographs on Wagner, Mahler, Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Berg. It would be impossible to attempt to summarise this massive and complex body of thought in the short space of the present article. There is no substitute for an often painful, though always enlightening, immersion in Adorno's own writings on music. Still, these writings pivot around an identifiable thematic core: they all have reference to the central topic of the relation of music to social reality. In this respect, they are rooted in Adorno's most basic philosophical concerns. Along with such figures as Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm, he was a member of the Institute of Social Research, which was attached to the University of Frankfurt before it was forced into temporary exile in the United States by Hitler's rise to power. The Frankfurt School was one of the primary intellectual sites at which a flexible, 'Western' version of Marxist social thought emerged in the inter-war period. In addition to its rejection of Stalinist political practice, Western Marxism distinguished itself from its Eastern counterpart by its refusal to interpret cultural phenomena as a superstructural reflection of a determining economic base. Soviet thinkers regarded cultural products as immediate expressions of contending standpoints in the struggle between economic classes. From their point of view, the facts of economics served as straightforward explanations of the facts of culture. For Adorno and his fellow Frankfurt theoreticians, Marxist insight consisted not in such reductionist explanations but rather in adoption of the standpoint of the

social 'totality'. Within this totality cultural phenomena, and especially works of art, possess an autonomous status. This means that they must be explained in terms of the formal laws that govern their production. But they must also be explained with reference to the social whole that they help comprise.

According to Adorno, then, music is both autonomous and an element of society. These two characteristics may seem to be contradictory, but they are in fact deeply connected. The autonomy of music does not stand in opposition to its social character; on the contrary, it is itself a social product. It is linked to the rise of modern bourgeois society in the 18th and 19th centuries. In its heroic phase, the period of its struggle against the feudal *ancien régime*, the European bourgeoisie emancipated music from its earlier implantation in religious and other ritual contexts, and established it as an independent art. Adorno's friend, Walter Benjamin, characterised the process of aesthetic secularisation as the loss of the 'aura' of the work of art, of its immediate and magical authority as an instrument of ritual and cult.<sup>1</sup> In Benjamin's account, the work of art, in the pre-modern era, was a symbol of divine transcendence; in the modern period, it became the concern of a specialised branch of culture, and therefore an object of conscious *Technik*. But while Benjamin located the loss of aura primarily in mass-produced art — photography, cinema, newspaper journalism, and so on — Adorno insisted that this process also characterised so-called serious art.

In the case of serious music specifically, loss of aura is reflected in the development of compositional technique, with its focused concern with the formal laws of musical production. For Adorno, such 'rationalisation' of musical practice is to be understood with respect to that of bourgeois society as a whole. Processes of rationalisation take place, not only in the aesthetic domain, but also in the spheres of the economy and of state administration. Economic rationalisation refers to the situation in which individuals must pursue their material self-interest by means of a calculated adaptation to market laws. Administrative rationalisation signifies the construction of a political bureaucracy in which civil servants attain their ends by submitting to the codified rules of professional conduct. In a similar way, musical rationalisation means that the modern composer can achieve his or her aesthetic purposes only by adapting to the laws of musical technique. Yet in Adorno's view, musical 'laws' — like those of economics and politics — are quite different from the laws of nature. They are products of history, and so are subject to historical trans-

formation. Schoenberg's great achievement was precisely to have demonstrated that what seemed to be the most basic and enduring substructure of Western music — tonality — was in truth a human creation with no more than temporary validity.<sup>2</sup> The avant-garde composer superseded tonality by following the objective historical tendency of the musical material itself, by setting free the dissonance that had already emerged in late Romantic music. In this way, according to Adorno, in the act of pursuing the autonomous demands of his own art, Schoenberg challenged the most basic ideological mystification of bourgeois society. This mystification consists of the interpretation of historical products of human activity as natural, eternal forces. By divesting these forces of their crude, thing-like character, by recognising that they are human creations, we open them to the possibility of conscious change.

Adorno admitted that music is not able to represent objects outside of itself in the sense of depicting or creating an image of such objects. Nonetheless, he insisted that the musical work of art is capable of articulating social truth. With this claim, Adorno was not in the least raising the demand that music prove itself politically and socially relevant by delivering an affirmative message. He rejected the *Gemeinschaftsmusik* (community-music) of Hans Eisler as well as the *Gebrauchsmusik* (use-music) of Kurt Weill for attempting to do just that. Adorno believed instead that music is able to perform a progressive social role only by resisting easy communicability. The social content of music must be elaborated in the pursuit of technical mastery of the most advanced musical material. Through the exercise of such mastery, the 'antinomies' — the contradictions or tensions — of the formal language of music come to express the contradictions of society itself. Adorno called the relationship between serious music and society a 'mimetic' one. Through mimesis, the musical work of art evokes social content in the sensuous medium of sound. Specifically, it calls for social change by speaking 'the coded language of suffering'.<sup>3</sup> According to Adorno, such language was especially well-represented by the free use of dissonance in Schoenberg's early 'expressionism', before the mechanical standardisation of twelve-tone technique set in. The suffering expressed by dissonance is pain at the liquidation of the individual ego by late bourgeois society. In order to grasp more fully Adorno's philosophy of music it is necessary to understand what this liquidation signifies.

By means of a fusion of Marxian and Freudian concepts, Adorno argued that the individual ego is not a

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin: 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), 217-253

<sup>2</sup> see Theodor Adorno: *Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York, 1973)

<sup>3</sup> Theodor Adorno: 'On the Social Situation of Music', in *Telos*, 35 (St Louis, 1978), 130

natural entity, but an arduous historical and psychological achievement.<sup>4</sup> It is in fact the product of bourgeois society in its initial, ascendent phase. Through a process of rational calculation, the bourgeois individual must master the natural environment in the interest of survival. But outer nature can be dominated only if inner nature is dominated as well. The drive for instinctual gratification must be delayed and sometimes denied if existence in a harsh environment is to be secured. The psychological controls that permit self-mastery are acquired through socialisation into the bourgeois family. By rebelling against and ultimately submitting to the authoritarian father, the individual internalises parental authority in the form of the superego. Without such internalised authority, the ego itself would not exist; it would not be able to distinguish itself from the chaos of its own impulses. In late bourgeois society, however, the development of a strong ego becomes extremely problematic. According to Adorno, the father's authority depends on his role as central participant in the economic marketplace. But this role is undermined with the transition from the competitive capitalism of a previous day to the monopoly capitalism of the 20th century. The giant firm on the one hand, and the interventionist state on the other, replace the individual entrepreneur as central economic participant. As the father's authority becomes more and more tenuous, the superego and ego are also weakened. The individual is threatened with liquidation at the hands of anonymous and overpowering forces.

Because it speaks the language of suffering, avant-garde music protests against the liquidation of the individual ego. In contrast, according to Adorno, popular music is not a critical expression of this liquidation. It is, rather, one of its instruments. Adorno developed this claim in some detail in a series of articles on jazz.<sup>5</sup> Seemingly democratic, jazz is in actuality totalitarian. Its core experience is a sado-masochistic one in which the 'jazz-subject' achieves pleasure from the recognition of its own impotence in the presence of an omnipotent collective. The jazz soloist appears to affirm his or her individuality by making improvisational 'breaks' with the chorus-like repetitions of the music. But this revolt is doomed to failure, destined to give way to adaptation. For the breaks go nowhere; they ultimately fall back into the overpowering collective refrain. The same principle of impotent self-assertion applies to the syncopation of jazz rhythms. Unlike the syncopation of Beethoven's music, which 'rises up against the existing law until it produces from out of it a new one', jazz syncopation is purposeless and arbi-

trarily revoked: 'It is merely coming-too-early, just as anxiety leads to premature ejaculation, as impotence expresses itself in premature and incomplete orgasm.'<sup>6</sup> If avant-garde music gives voice to the suffering of the individual at the moment of its annihilation, jazz transforms this moment into an occasion of aesthetic pleasure, an entertainment event.

It is not difficult to recognise a Eurocentric limitation in Adorno's undifferentiated critique of jazz. On the one hand, he neglects to locate jazz concretely in the historical context of African experience in the New World. It would be odd, to say the least, if a musical form that had its origins in blues, and that could only develop by braving the hostility of the surrounding white culture, had no element of social criticism. On the other hand, he fails to distinguish between genuine and commercial jazz; that is to say, he draws no distinction between the African-American musical tradition and the shallowness of American big-band music and its derivatives. The omission is significant, because it was the development of the dance band in the 1930s and 40s that tamed jazz in the interest of social conformity. Jazz, in its most broadly disseminated expression, thereby became a form of popular music properly so-called. It was transformed from protest at the suffering of an enslaved and exploited people into an instrument of the reproduction of the dominant social order.

Adorno identified such reproduction of the repressive social totality as the central function of popular music as a whole. In this account, 'popular music' has a very specific meaning. It refers, not to the precapitalist musical traditions that genuinely emanated from subordinate classes, but to commercial music produced and distributed by the giant economic concerns that comprise the music industry. So understood, popular music is one aspect of what Adorno called the 'totally administered society'. In its early competitive phase, bourgeois society subjected its working population to the cultural dislocation and industrial brutality documented by Charles Dickens, among others. Yet in Adorno's account this society was riven by contradictions which permitted the existence of a free space capable of sustaining the individual's capacity for critical reflection. With the rise of the monopoly firm and the interventionist state in the 20th century such free space largely disappears. Especially in the role of consumer, the individual is offered pseudo-satisfactions which tie him or her directly to the administrative apparatus. There seems no point in rebelling against a social system that, after all, delivers the goods. Popular music is one of those goods. By relying upon colouristic effects, standard-

<sup>4</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972), 43–80

<sup>5</sup> see especially Theodor Adorno: 'Über Jazz', in *Moments Musicaux: Neuedruckte Aufsätze, 1928 bis 1962* (Frankfurt am Main, 1964), 84–115

<sup>6</sup> Theodor Adorno quoted in Susan Buck-Morss: *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York, 1979), 105

ised, easily recognisable forms, undemanding melodies, and so on, the popular song has an infantilised, fetishistic character. It plays upon and encourages the ego-weaknesses of its audience. It demands, not the concentrated listening appropriate to serious music, which must actively relate all musical elements to a dynamically unfolding structure, but a regressed, atomistic listening, geared to purely passive amusement by isolated, meaningless elements. (There is striking confirmation of this thesis in the recent development of the music video, in which even the simplest narrative unity is sacrificed in favour of a series of random musico-visual occurrences.) Yet such regressive 'entertainment' does not really deliver the gratification it promises: 'Rather it seems to complement the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression, the inability to communicate at all. It inhabits the pockets of silence that develop between people moulded by anxiety, work, and undemanding docility.'

We would be mistaken if we saw Adorno as a cultural mandarin, a defender of the tradition of 'high culture' against popular aesthetic expression. The pop music which receives such rough treatment with Adorno is 'popular' only in the sense that it is directed

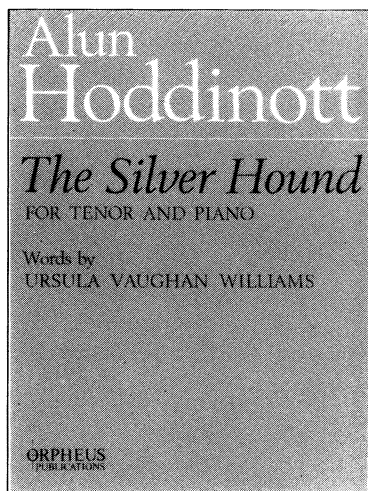
to the mass consumer population; it is, however, an instrument of manipulation, not self-expression. Moreover, Adorno extends his critique of musical fetishism to much contemporary classical music. The worship of star conductors, the cult of musical instruments and especially of master violins, the widespread reproduction of melodies apart from their complex contexts, arrangements built upon the assumption that older music needs to be rhythmically or colouristically freshened, and so on, all indicate a regression in the conditions of listening in the classical sphere as well. Measured against the infantile pseudo-pleasures of both popular and classical music, the achievements of the avant-garde tradition of Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg are marked by an irreducible negativity. Their purpose is to keep faith with the utopia of genuine gratification by refusing to identify it with any extent social condition: 'The promise of happiness, once the definition of art, can no longer be found except where the mask has been torn from the countenance of false happiness.'

Adorno's final lesson is that this austere performance is the most that music is able to accomplish in a false and unjust world. The scope of music would undoubtedly expand in an emancipated society. But emancipation remains beyond the reach of music itself.

<sup>7</sup> Theodor Adorno: 'On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York, 1982), 271

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 274

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