

## *Editors' Introduction: Adorno, Music, Modernity*

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“As a temporal art,” Theodor W. Adorno observed, “music is bound to the fact of succession and is hence as irreversible as time itself. By starting it commits itself to carrying on, to becoming something new, to developing. What we may conceive of as musical transcendence, namely, the fact that at any given moment it has become something and something other than it was, that points *beyond itself*—all that is no mere metaphysical imperative dictated by some external authority. It lies in the nature of music and will not be denied.”<sup>1</sup>

Such remarks remind us once again that Adorno was at once a philosopher *and* a musicologist: among all the members of the Frankfurt School, he possessed not only a sociological and social-theoretical awareness of the dialectical relation between music and society but also an incomparable feel for music’s inner power. Indeed, he thought of philosophy itself in musical terms. Despite his well-known condemnation of commodified music as one facet of the “culture industry,” Adorno’s appeal to music’s “transcendence” betrays an

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1. Adorno, “Stravinsky,” 150–51.

enduring belief in the relative autonomy of the musical artwork, the persistence, even, of the “aura” whose dissolution through mass reproduction his colleague and friend Walter Benjamin welcomed with far less ambivalence. Adorno was a thinker of exact imagination, alive to the inner complexities both of music and of philosophical argument. He studied composition with the Viennese modernist composer Alban Berg and produced a respectable body of musical compositions, including an intriguing (unfinished) opera project, *Der Schatz des Indianer-Joe* (*The Treasure of Indian Joe*), based on the writings of Mark Twain. Of the published complete works in twenty volumes, no fewer than five are dedicated to musical writings, including monographs on Richard Wagner, Gustav Mahler, and Berg, as well as the notorious *Philosophy of New Music*, which developed a dialectical comparison between Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky.

But for Adorno, music was not merely an interest and an important aspect of his writing; he argued for a special affinity between critical theory and musical form. Based on music's complex materiality and the nonreferential character of much Western concert music, Adorno saw that music had a greater capacity for immanent critique than most other forms of art. In the compositional procedures of Beethoven's music, based on gradual motivic development, he found important structural analogies to his own philosophical method. The analogy became especially evident when Adorno turned his attention to what he called the “late style” in Beethoven. It could be argued that Adorno's philosophical work itself, with its critical interest in the “cracks and fissures” of society and the unresolved negativity of thought, came to exemplify a species of late style. “One can no longer compose like Beethoven,” Adorno observed, “but one must *think* as he composed.”<sup>2</sup>

Both music scholars and philosophers have long been aware of this special relationship in Adorno's thinking. Early work on Adorno, above all Martin Jay's short but influential monograph *Adorno* (1984), shows an awareness and a fine understanding of the musical strand of his philosophy. Yet it was only with Rose Rosengard Subotnik's *Developing Variations* (1991) that a wider Anglo-American academic audience was introduced to Adorno's musical thought, which resulted in a slew of publications on Adorno and music over the next decade or so. Not all readers responded with praise. In a famous essay for the *New York Review of Books*, the pianist and musicologist Charles Rosen wrote that Adorno “combined brilliant insights into the phenomena of culture with an essentially fraudulent manipulation of terms to hide the inadequate

2. Adorno, *Beethoven*, 160.

relation of his theory to historical detail.” Much of Adorno’s writing on music, Rosen continued, “reads like a parody of the only too familiar Philistine picture of the avant-garde tradition as the work of degenerate perverts.”<sup>3</sup> Such venomous lines (with their readiness to leverage prejudices that are ostensibly illegitimate) are not unrepresentative of the polarizing effect of Adorno’s musical-critical legacy. In 2003 the influential classical music reviewer Alex Ross asked provocatively, “What happened to German music?,” and laid the blame for the current state of contemporary music in Germany, which Ross considers dire, squarely on Adorno’s doorstep.<sup>4</sup>

The extreme responses he elicited notwithstanding, it was hardly an accident that Adorno became a central figure in Anglo-American musical thought just before the turn of the millennium. In many ways Adorno’s aesthetic theory and trenchant social critique provided an answer to the challenge issued by the late Joseph Kerman in *Contemplating Music* (1985), a plea for a *critical* rather than positivist approach to musicology, and the starting point of what became known as the new musicology. In the 1990s there was no way around Adorno—even (or, one might say, especially) in a field as remote from Adorno’s musical tastes as popular music.<sup>5</sup> The zenith of musicology’s embrace of Adorno can perhaps be pinpointed at the huge millennial meeting of the American Musicological Society (along with nine other professional musical associations) in Toronto in 2000, which featured a much-anticipated, star-studded, and predictably explosive special session on Adorno. Never had Adorno seemed so *aktuell* to so many musicologists.

There is an interesting asymmetry in this wave. The publication of the important posthumous works on musical topics, which is still ongoing, only began toward the end of musicology’s fascination with Adorno. As a consequence, important works such as *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (English translation 1998), *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction* (2006), and *Current of Music* (2009) have not met with as much scholarly interest as they deserve. These writings, based on lecture notes, transcriptions, or, in the case of the Beethoven book, simply a compilation of fragmentary thoughts, offer important insights into some of the key themes in Adorno’s thinking, such as the sociology of musical genre, the historical transformation of music from the “heroic” or high bourgeois era to late modernity, the meaning of both performance and listening in the era of mass communication, and the specific

3. Rosen, “Should We Adore Adorno?,” 59.

4. Ross, “Ghost Sonata,” 64–71.

5. See Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*.

challenges or deformations of the radio on musical form, a theme that, by extension, implicates many contemporary digital practices.

Perhaps ironically, it is the unfinished character of these books that sometimes makes points with greater transparency than the polished and stylized prose of the published works. There is still much to discover in these new publications, and they raise again the question of Adorno's *Aktualität* with renewed vigor. We are therefore pleased to present this special issue on Adorno and music, which contains essays by some of the foremost musicologists and scholars in the tradition of critical theory.

### **References**

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