Review of “Essays on Music”

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This is a collection of twenty-seven of Theodor Adorno's essays on music, some newly translated for this volume (twelve translated into English for the first time by Susan Gillespie). The essays are grouped into four sections, each preceded by Richard Leppert's commentary: "Locating Music: Society, Modernity, and the New"; "Culture, Technology, and Listening"; "Music and Mass Culture"; and "Composition, Composers, and Works." Leppert has also contributed an introductory essay that is both biography and introduction to "the intellectual tradition within which Adorno's thought developed" (vii). The earliest of the essays dates from 1927, the latest from 1969 (the year of Adorno's death).

Leppert's introduction depicts Adorno as a public intellectual, a dimension often overlooked in American considerations of his life and work, presumably because of the difficulty of his writing (17). He had a profound influence on the student movement of the 1960s, which Leppert says turned against him as it took a more radical direction in the last half of the decade. "Adorno," he notes, "had refused to join the student protests in Frankfurt in 1969" and even "called in the police to end what he mistakenly thought was a student occupation" (18). In April, student demonstrators disrupted a lecture, resulting in Adorno's leaving the lecture hall accompanied by taunts and the declaration that "as an institution, Adorno is dead" (18). He suffered a fatal heart attack four months later. That Adorno was an "institution" in the eyes of the students is telling, but the incident also illustrates the tension that developed in many cases among practitioners of critical theory who differed (and still do) on the degree to which critical theory demands revolutionary practice. Where student radicals saw a disconnect between theory and practice, they were suspicious of theory. The result, in some cases, was an anti-intellectualism that appeared in its most extreme form in China's Cultural Revolution. Leppert's lucid account of critical theory depicts it as an attack on "traditional" theory for its inability to address "the problem of the social totality" (20). Students and others impatient with critical theory saw themselves taking this critique a step further when they believed that critical theory had itself become traditional (and that Adorno had become an institution). The irony is that, in this, they may have been truer to Adorno than Adorno—at least to the extent that they did not abandon theory altogether.

Impatience with Adorno was partly a result of the apparent indirection of his response to oppressive structures, most evident in his readings of the "culture industry," a term that he and Horkheimer substituted for "mass" or "popular" culture (43) as a way to emphasize that so-called "mass" culture was manufactured and imposed from above. What looked like hesitation in action was often self-critical
reflection on the extent to which all culture (including one's own practice) is tainted. Revolutionary theory has often depicted itself in a dragon-slaying role. Adorno and his colleagues in critical theory complicated things by insisting that the dragon slayer had already been devoured by the dragon and therefore had to act from the belly of the beast. As Leppert notes, this insight is a legacy of Nietzsche's understanding of language as "prison house" (67). Language is among the most dramatic and visible forms of the culture within which we live, and Adorno, like Nietzsche, was conscious of the ease with which it transmutes from a medium that sustains us to a prison that contains us. "Adorno's enemy," Leppert writes, "is the language of 'communication,' today perhaps best encapsulated in the common urge to 'get to the point,' or 'indicate the bottom line'—writing in the service of instrumentality, of time-is-money 'practicality.' His position hinges on the insight that the extreme forms of 'communication' ideology defining the goals of 'plain' usage have been fully incorporated not only into the practice of writing but into language itself. Thought takes too long. Profit cannot wait on discourse—not the least explanation for the now ubiquitous phenomena of television sound bites, 'factoids,' and print-media sidebars: 'information' at a glance" (66). Alas, revolution can no more wait than profit, and critical theory has often found itself waging a war on two fronts.

Leppert discusses the apparent political failure of critical theory at length as a prelude to the essays (69). "By the 1930s," he writes, "it was quite apparent to members of the Institute that progressive political change was out of the question" (69-70). As a result, "Critical Theory moved away from a critique of political economy in favor of a critique of instrumental reason" (70). Though progressive political change was out of the question, Adorno did not abandon the conviction that it could be otherwise; but it was art, Leppert writes, not politics, "that for Adorno posited an 'otherwise' to the present" (70). Near the end of his life, Adorno responded to charges of quietism in an essay titled "Resignation": "Thought is happiness," he wrote, "even where it defines unhappiness: by enunciating it. By this alone happiness reaches into the universal unhappiness. Whoever does not let it atrophy has not resigned" (72). As Leppert notes, this is a foregrounding of the aesthetic that is unlikely to satisfy many political activists. But "the radical quality of Adorno's aesthetic theory is that it redefines the enterprise of aesthetics by insisting on its link not to beauty as such but to the 'beauty' of human emancipation" (73). "Tradition must be confronted 'with the most advanced stage of human consciousness'" (80), and in this way self-replicating tradition may be transformed, the process of self-replication interrupted—if only for a moment. Critical Theory's continued relevance lies precisely here, where its aesthetics more than its politics confronts the beast from its belly.

In his commentary on the first section of essays, Leppert offers a succinct account of the place of mimesis in Adorno's aesthetic theory. "Mimetic behavior," Leppert writes, "seeks to enact a reconciliation of subject to object. Mimetic activity occurs both in production (in music, both composing and performing) and in consumption (listening)" (89). The reconciliation is utopian, so the process of art runs parallel to philosophy as a critical practice. Art confronts modernity's incomprehensibility, Leppert writes, "in one of two ways: either by attempting to stuff modernity back into the clothes of the pre-modern, pretending to a familiarity that is only ideological–in other words denying reality–or by acknowledging modernity's radical strangeness (and estrangement) by direct confrontation via art techniques up to the task, thereby making critical sense of it. But to accomplish the latter, new art must make itself strange, because the techniques of old do not permit access to modernity, and this fact results in art's distance from an audience that social conditions regressively shape. In an art worthy of the name, production and consumption cannot be productively brought together, Adorno maintains, unless society itself changes. And he is clear that art itself is not going to change the world–its role is principally diagnostic" (95). No
Brechtian hammers here, but no simple mirrors either. If this is a theory of social change, it is not a theory for the impatient. Assessments of Adorno's continued relevance hinge largely on the importance the interpreter attaches to art's diagnostic function. If the point is to change the world, does art's diagnosis (or philosophy's) reduce to mere interpretation?

Adorno's 1956 essay, "Music, Language, and Composition," sets the tone for the first section. It begins with the simple statement that "Music is similar to language" (113). But it continues almost immediately with the equally direct statement that "music is not language" (113). As is so often the case in Adorno, the interplay of similarity and difference transforms both terms. This essay tells readers as much about language as about music; and, if the point of explanation is to connect the less familiar with the more familiar, we may find ourselves wondering which, in this case, is which. Music, like language, "is a temporal succession of articulated sounds that are more than just sound. They say something... The succession of sounds is related to logic; there is a right and a wrong. But what is said cannot be abstracted from the music; it does not form a system of signs" (113). This leads Adorno to distinguish "signifying language" (114) from "theological" language, of which music is an instance: "What music says is a proposition at once distinct and concealed. Its idea is the form of the name of God. It is demythologized prayer, freed from the magic of making anything happen, the human attempt, futile as always, to name the name itself, not to communicate meanings" (114). It aims, he says, at "intention-less language" (114). But it does not separate itself entirely from signifying language: music entirely without signification would resemble "an acoustical kaleidoscope," but "as absolute signification," it would "pass, falsely, into language" (114). This leads Adorno to the question of interpretation, where he makes a key distinction that is as significant to language as to music: "To interpret language means to understand language; to interpret music means to make music" (115). Adorno is sharply critical of attempts "to do away with music's similarity to language" (120), both by what he calls Stravinsky's "archaic reversion" and by a rebellion that desires "to catapult itself out of history altogether" (120). For Adorno, the problem with this "objectivism in music" is that it "turns into its opposite": "The force that imagines it is overcoming the arbitrary rule of the subject...is identical with complete reification," and "the desire to be pure nature corresponds to the purely manufactured thing" (121). This is the heart of Adorno's theory, which relentlessly exposes the ease with which challenges to manufactured culture themselves become products of the manufacturing process they challenge: challenges to the culture industry are part of the machinery. Though Adorno is writing here of music, this returns us to Marx's distinction between interpretation and change. If to understand music is to make it, then we may be on our way to understanding why Marx's philosophy came to focus as it did on production. To interpret the world is to make it, and that makes philosophy more akin to the "theological" language of music than to the "signifying" language of communication.

Adorno addresses this directly in his 1953 essay "On the Contemporary Relationship of Philosophy and Music," one of the essays that is translated into English here for the first time. "In music," he writes, "what is at stake is not meaning, but gestures" (139). He speaks here of music as a "secularly preserved form of prayer" (141) and as a form of language: "As language, music tends toward pure naming, the absolute unity of object and sign, which in its immediacy is lost to all human knowledge" (140). This absolute unity parallels philosophy's passion for wisdom and its search for truth: "since the truth of musical works themselves unfolds in time, it is no metaphorical exaggeration, nor is it the commonplace reference to the so-called living I-Thou relationship between subject and object, when one states that Beethoven, for example, is revealed much more readily when one starts from what confronts us today, as the construction of an antagonistic totality, and ultimately its suspension, than if one were to confine
oneself to the historical preconditions and immediate intentions from which this work once originated" (147). This reading of Beethoven allows Adorno to equate Beethoven's music with Hegel's logic (as he does, for example, in "On the Problem of Musical Analysis," 176). He describes critique as "the law of form of the works themselves" (158), meaning that the critic's task mirrors the composer's: the process of orchestration, for example, has a "form-creating" effect (151), and successful criticism embodies this form in its response to the orchestration of a piece of music. Turning again to the 1969 essay "On the Problem of Musical Analysis," we see that Adorno, in defining analysis, asserts that "'To analyze' means much the same as to become aware of a work as a force-field organized around a problem" (173). Philosophically, the problem, the force-field, and the work are equally important.

Adorno associates art and music with memory, which, in his critical theory, has a distinctly transformative impact: "Art," he writes, "and above all music, is the effort to preserve in memory and cultivate those split-off elements of truth that reality has handed over to the growing domination of nature, to scientific and technological standards that permit no exceptions" (192). There is a quality of rear-guard action in Adorno, a struggle to make a space for human truth in a world increasingly filled by non-human (and often inhuman) necessity. He speaks of "the barbaric middle-class separation of feeling from understanding" which is "only externalized when art is set up as a nature reserve for the eternally human and of comfortable immediacy, isolated from the process of enlightenment" (193). Making a space for human truth is not creating a nature reserve for timeless humanity; it must be connected with the process of enlightenment (reminding us, as Leppert noted earlier, that Adorno's aesthetic is connected with the beauty of human emancipation). "Space" is dynamic, not static, temporal, not timeless: "Though today all art has and must have a bad conscience to the extent that it does not make itself stupid, nevertheless its abolishment would be false in a world in which what dominates needs art as its corrective: the contradiction between what is and the true, between the management of life and humanity" (200).

That Adorno saw the expanding sphere of "the management of life" as contradicting humanity is reflected in his insistence, as Leppert notes, that fascism was "the symptom of the prevailing condition rather than... a political aberration" (249). For Adorno, fascist totalization is intrinsically (and paradoxically) connected with atomization. That he saw this in music is evident in his criticism of "atomized listening" (226) and music on radio, which he saw as replacing music with "musical goods," commodifying it. In "The Radio Symphony," he decries the naive identification of a symphony broadcast with a live symphony (252). This is partly a reflection of the technology available at the time (1941) and what it did to sound quality, but it is also because of the shift from a communal to an individual experience effected by music on radio and to the atomization of the music itself. "Structurally," Adorno writes, "one hears the first bar of a Beethoven symphonic movement only at the very moment when one hears the last bar" (255). But as radio transforms music into just one more piece of furniture, one hears it incidentally—and radio commentary tends to "deify" as well as "reify" details at the expense of the whole work (266). Adorno's critical comments on radio and phonographic reproduction are rooted in his conviction that changes in technology change what technology makes. In "The Curves of the Needle," he uses photography as an analogy: "the transition form artisanal to industrial production transforms not only the technology of distribution but also that which is distributed" (271). He asserts that "the gramophone belongs to the pregnant stillness of individuals" (272) and decries the fact that the piano has been transformed (under pressure of an emerging recording industry) from "a musical instrument into a piece of bourgeois furniture" (273). The phonograph becomes a boundary marker: "With its moveable horn and its solid spring housing, the gramophone's social position is that of a border marker between two periods
of musical practice" (273)–it marks the transformation of music from something one produces to something one consumes. In his 1938 essay "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," Adorno connects music with language in his comment that "If nobody can any longer speak, then certainly nobody can any longer listen" (289). It is in this essay that Adorno offers perhaps his most lucid account of fetishism (296ff), concluding with his association of vulgarization and enchantment as "hostile sisters" (298). He writes that "When the feelings seize on exchange-value it is no mystical transubstantiation. It corresponds to the behavior of the prisoner who loves his cell because he has been left nothing else to love" (297). This essay also contains a prophetic comment on mass mobilization across the seeming hostility of generations: "The seeming opposition of the generations is nowhere more transparent than in rage. The bigots who complain to the radio stations in pathetic-sadistic letters of the jazzing up of holy things and the youth who delight in such exhibitions are of one mind. It requires only the proper situation to bring them together in a united front" (312).

In his introduction to the fourth group of essays ("Music and Mass Culture"), Leppert cites Frank Zappa's dismissal of the Sex Pistols as "manufactured" (315)–the criticism that Adorno repeatedly leveled at "popular" music. Leppert is at pains in this section to clarify Adorno's critique of jazz, which he says is primarily a critique of the German appropriation of swing, in which the class origin is reversed vis-a-vis the United States (358). Adorno's criticism of jazz, properly understood, is an anti-racist criticism of the racist occupation of big band music characteristic of German jazz at the time. Adorno saw German swing in the Weimar period as an example of colonizing otherness (355) associated with kitsch, which Leppert describes as a means to forget--"but less to forget the past than the present" (361). We might take that one step further and note the frequency with which kitsch consciously reconstructs the past to obscure the present. Theme parks as well as popular music (often in combination) are good examples of this process at work–running counter to the connection of music with memory in Adorno's analysis. It is a small step, though, from music and memory to music and memory management, as in the image of European culture as a kind of "National Park" that Adorno repeated more than once (386).

As in other early essays collected here, Adorno weaves a close connection between music and theory in his 1932 essay "On the Social Situation of Music." He speaks there of a "parallel relationship" between "music as art" and "the task of social theory" (393): "Music is under the same obligation as theory to reach out beyond the current consciousness of the masses" (394). The relationship between theory/music and the masses has a bearing on Adorno's critical response to fascism: In objectivist music, "it appears that the sovereign composer stands in free control of the supposed musical organism, in much the same way that in fascism a 'leadership elite' appears to be in control, while in truth power over the social 'organism' lies in the hands of monopoly capitalism" (404). What most alarms Adorno–and what makes these essays more timely than ever–is creeping commodification, what we would now put under the rubric of globalization. Everything is subsumed by the market, reducing "leaders" to front persons–and the people to a mass subordinated to bourgeois categories: "There is no longer any 'folk' whose songs and games could be taken up and sublimated by art; the opening up of markets and the bourgeois process of rationalization have subordinated all society to bourgeois categories" (427). Adorno is dismissive of "popular" music, which he says, "inclines to smile at itself in order to pass by without being challenged" (427)–reminiscent of the monster Kierkegaard described that could make the whole age laugh and make it forget that it was laughing at itself. Substantively, Adorno's objection to popular music lies both in its tendency to evoke stronger reaction to the part than to the whole (439) and in its standardization (441). It is, he says, "predigested" (443). But it also functions in such a way, Adorno believes, as to compel people "to behave voluntarily in ways one expected them to behave in only when they were paid for it"
(451). He describes "the popular music fan" as "going his way firmly shutting his eyes and gritting his teeth in order to avoid deviation from what he has decided to acknowledge" (466).

Leppert writes that "Adorno saw modernity as a long history of lost opportunity in the face of myriad catastrophes" (513). Despite this long history of lost opportunity, Adorno did not, as I mentioned in the beginning, abandon the possibility that it could be otherwise–and he found the "otherwise" in art, particularly music. Here again, it is important to note the extent to which music as the place of "otherwise" parallels philosophy. As noted earlier, Adorno saw Beethoven's music as reenactment of Hegelian philosophy. More generally, he saw the making of music as a way to confront the distortions of the present with truly human possibilities. He argued, in Leppert's words, "that chamber music is the sonoric embodiment of a sociality otherwise disappearing from modern society. Chamber music–and he had the string quartet in the forefront of his mind–represented for him a kind of utopian social balance between the promulgation of individuality, on the one hand, and the relation of individuality to the enactment of community, on the other" (522). That this argument can be sustained across radically different musical tastes is reflected in the fact that it has been resurrected for jazz by performer/theorists like Wynton Marsalis and for punk by the likes of Patti Smith and Joe Strummer. When Adorno says that "art vehemently opposes false clarity" (551-552), he anticipates the Talking Heads' admonition to stop making sense.

The last section of essays consists of Adorno's comments on specific composers. His comments on Wagner in particular are fascinating. In his speculation on "Wagner's Relevance for Today," written in 1963, Adorno speaks of the work of art as a "spiritual" entity: "As spiritual entities, works of art are not complete in themselves. They create a magnetic field of all possible intentions and forces, of inner tendencies and countervailing ones, of successful and necessarily unsuccessful elements. Objectively, new layers are constantly detaching themselves, emerging from within; others grow irrelevant and die off. One relates to a work of art not merely, as is often said, by adapting it to fit a new situation, but rather by deciphering within it things to which one has a historically different reaction" (586). The transformative power of art is clear, but it is also transformed; for Adorno, even Wagner becomes new in a new time–and that is part of what makes art, and music in particular, so explosively powerful. In his reading of Wagner, Adorno insists that he "realized without reservation that the binding, truly general character of musical works of art is to be found, if at all, only through the medium of their particularity and concretion, and not by recourse to any kind of general types" (588). Adorno locates Wagner's musical power in the fact that there is nothing general there except the extreme of particularity (589). In this, he takes Wagner back to the roots of "Western" philosophy: "without solidity there can be no dynamics,...where everything flows nothing happens" (597), a dispute as old as Heraclitus and Parmenides. "Music," Adorno writes, "has as one of its indispensable tasks the overcoming of the temporal dimension through articulation" (639); but, no matter how successful it is in performing that task, we encounter it as embodied beings in time and space. That returns us to the tensions between "signifying" and "theological" language Adorno considered in the essays collected in the first section, and there is something appropriately "Western" in the extent to which the theological transforms the world and is itself transformed by its entrance into the significative. With that entrance, it always runs the risk Adorno attributes generally to culture: "Culture that supposes it is resisting barbarism frequently assists the latter by its reactionary worldview" (672). That, of course, is exactly what the students who taunted Adorno from the lecture hall in 1969 believed him guilty of doing.

Richard Leppert and Susan Gillespie have done a real service by making these essays more widely
accessible. Gillespie's lucid translations, Leppert's insightful introductions, and Adorno's adamant refusal to get to the bottom line are all welcome contributions to the cultivation of speculative eyes and ears essential to our humanity under the pressure of insistent globalization that would have us close our eyes, grit our teeth, and let the Market, not the music, carry us.

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