

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THEODOR ADORNO

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MUSIC TODAY is managed, controlled and mass produced by a monstrous culture industry which dispenses its goods to an anonymous public whose unconscious values have been predetermined and conditioned by the technology of a conformist society. New music, whose function is continually to contradict and oppose, through its own inner tensions, the society from which it springs, is in danger of becoming too widely separated from this society and at the same time of losing its tensions by regressing to neutral, lifeless, overformalized arrangements of notes. This, in essence, is the philosophy of Theodor Adorno, professor of sociology and philosophy at the University of Frankfurt. Just who Adorno is, his reasons for this pessimistic view, and his significance in the world of contemporary music are questions which this paper will attempt to answer.

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno was born in Frankfurt, Germany, on September 11, 1903. As a sociologist he has had a long association with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, of which he has been managing director since 1953. During the second World War he was forced to leave Germany and come to the United States where he was musical director of the Princeton Radio Research Project from 1938-41. After returning to Germany following the war, he again came to this country in 1952-54. During this time he collaborated in the research and writing of *The Authoritarian Personality*, the first of the five volumes in Harper's "Studies in Prejudice" sponsored by the American Jewish Council.

Adorno's position as a sociologist, as represented in this work and in his activities with the Institute for Social Research in general, seems to be one haunted by two basic fears: first, that sociologists will create a sociology that is based on the radical empiricism of clever mathematics and nose-counting which

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has gained so much ground in the social sciences in recent years (Adorno argues that statistical information derived from these means can only give us a somewhat generalized classificatory scheme and does not enable us to understand society); second, that the horrors of the totalitarian regimes, especially those of the Hitler variety, will be forgotten and thereby return. Adorno's sociology has been explained as a curious mixture of Marxian ideas of economic determinism and of Freudian psychological methods. He fears totalitarianism and the idea that historical processes can best be explained as a result of production and consumption; and he fears the loss of individualism and claims that society is kept together by the threat of personal physical violence. To Adorno, sociology must become a critical discipline. It must show up society for what it is and what it can do or destroy. To do this, sociology must have a doctrine or philosophy; indeed, Adorno, who has been called an intellectual Marxist, argues many of his points with agile dialectical reasoning.

In addition to his professional activities as a sociologist and philosopher, Adorno is a prominent figure in the field of music criticism. As a young man he studied composition with Bernhard Sekles and Alban Berg, piano with E. Jung and Eduard Steuermann, and musicology at the University of Vienna. During this time he was engaged as a music critic, and in 1928-31 he was editor of the music periodical *Anbruch* in Vienna. While he was musical director of the Princeton Radio Research Project in America, he advised Thomas Mann on certain musical matters in the writing of *Doktor Faustus*. Since 1950 he has regularly given lectures and courses in composition at the Kranichstein Institute summer session, Darmstadt, and in 1954 he was awarded the Schönberg Medal. Adorno's output as a composer includes mostly songs, but he has also written two movements for string quartet, three women's choruses, six short orchestral pieces, arrangements of French folksongs and orchestrations of Schumann piano pieces (Gurlitt 1959:9). His writings on music include: *The Philosophy of New Music* (1949), *Essay on Wagner* (1952), *Dissonances* (1956), *Klangfiguren: Musical Writings I* (1959), *Mahler* (1960), and many articles. As a music critic, Adorno is alternately praised as a person of sharp, penetrating insight and damned as an idealist whose negative attitude and vague theorizing cannot cope with the realities of modern music.

As a sociologist and musician both, Adorno's favorite and

most characteristic area of expression is that of music-sociology. In reality most of Adorno's musical writings, especially those of a general nature, can be grouped in this area, for when he speaks of music he speaks of it in the context of his social theories. In the same way that his sociology is imbued with a critical philosophical basis, Adorno's music-sociology represents a critical scheme of aesthetics. His aesthetics seems to be influenced for the most part by Hegel's dialectical reconciliation of contrasts, as his sociology is influenced by Marx's dialectical reconciliation of class differences. In Adorno's aesthetic creed the element of tension between opposites is the absolute criterion for qualitative evaluation and also for formal unity.

As in his sociology, Adorno's music-sociology goes far beyond mere statistical analysis. He views music history basically in terms of collective behavior guided by the laws of consumption, with only occasional appearances of significant individuals who by themselves affect the progress of music. Because of the abstract, non-material nature of musical sound, the society can hear in the music what it wishes and can even use music for ideological purposes. In this way music can not only be misused as an ideology for the immediate means of power control but can also regress to a state of unawareness of itself and its role in society. Adorno feels that the role of music, especially serious music, is to reflect in its own materials and content the contradictions and tensions of the society which produces it. In this way, serious music, to be true to itself and its society, must be conceived in a continual state of dialectical opposition and dissatisfaction. The synthesis of this opposition is, according to Adorno, social and aesthetic truth. This is what Adorno means when he says, "the social sense of the musical phenomenon is inseparable from its truth or untruth, its success or failure, its contradiction or agreement."¹ Because of this, music-sociology, for Adorno, cannot limit itself to empirical investigations based on listener reaction but must work to discern the real social position of music and its real essence within society.

The urgency of some critical aesthetic evaluation in these terms of music today is reflected in Adorno's views of the present musical situation. He believes that there is becoming less

¹"Der gesellschaftliche Sinn musikalischer Phänomene ist untrennbar von ihrer Wahrheit oder Unwahrheit, ihrem Gelingen, oder Misslingen, ihrer Widersprüchlichkeit oder Stimmigkeit" (1959b:11).

and less difference between the so-called extremes of popular music on the one hand and serious music on the other—in fact, between all types of music along this continuum. Much of his criticism in this respect is directed toward the monolithic “culture industry” which, according to Adorno, controls the production and distribution of the culture products. The unconscious acceptance of this control by the manipulated and conditioned listener is reinforced by the sensuous and seductive nature of the music—music which is characterized by a lack of tension and is therefore socially and aesthetically false. Parallel to this is the destruction of meaningful form; and meaningful form, in Adorno’s opinion, can only be achieved by the clear articulation of the contrasts or tension-producing elements in relationship to the whole. The listener regresses to the point of hearing only the charming, isolated moments of a composition or focusing his attention on the performer, and he thereby destroys his perception of the whole.

This tendency toward “atomized” listening has its effect on the size of the standard repertory of accepted classics, which through a steady shrinking process is narrowed to a selection which has nothing to do with quality. A “pantheon of best sellers” arises from this process. They become popular not because of striking individual features but because they successfully conform to a narrow and predetermined standardization achieved by the neutralization of dissimilar features. Culture goods are produced according to a formula, a formula which copies and perpetuates the fetishistic aspects of the listener’s regression. The ultimate result of this leveling process is that the personal judgment of the listener is today completely eliminated from the marketability of the “art” product. When Adorno makes the statement that “the liquidation of individualism is the real signature of the new musical situation,”² he is in essence referring both to the music and to its audience as well.

Schönberg seems to Adorno to be the epitome of modern musical innovation. Admittedly a member and supporter of the Schönberg school of the 1920’s, Adorno, in his *Philosophy of New Music*, portrays Schönberg and Stravinsky as the two protagonists of a new age. But whereas Stravinsky glorified the

²“Die Liquidierung des Individuums ist die eigentliche Signatur des neuen musikalischen Zustandes” (1956b:683).

liquidation of individualism and dehumanized music to a phenomenon of mere sound, Schönberg, according to Adorno, expressed the bitter resentment of this liquidation and opened up an entirely new world of expression through the freeing of music from the supremacy of the triad (Mayer 1961:236-40). Schönberg's successors, however, have lost sight of the real significance of the 12-tone row by using it as a means of creating neutral and static forms rather than by using it as he did, as a means of binding together contrasting and more or less explosive musical forces.

Adorno condemns "prefabricated" musical forms which substitute technique for composition. He argues that the "ultra-constructivists" are using technical manipulation as an end in itself. This total rationalization of form, which is mistaken for musical architecture and which denies music its essential feature of unfolding in time, results in an absence of form. The doing away with subjectivity, the fear of expression and the neutralization of musical material to rigid self-contained formulas are the symptoms of an aging modern music living off the remains of the innovations made forty-odd years ago. In short, there is a loss of dynamic tension.

Adorno explains the reasons for this on two different levels: that of the relationship of the artist and his work to society, and that of the relationships of the musical materials themselves. On the first, or broad, level, Adorno clearly states, "The symptoms of the aging of modern music are, sociologically, the reduction of freedom and the disintegration of the individual, which are accepted, endorsed and copied in private life by people who have lost their sense of direction and their individuality" (1956a:28). He seems to feel that the same thing is happening to modern music that is happening to popular music, classical music, and music in general. At the same time, however, Adorno strongly implies that the reason that modern music suffers so and fails to fulfill its function of expressing tension and dissatisfaction is that it has become too far removed from society. In speaking of the "third program" and special art theaters for modern radical music Adorno says, "as necessary as such segregation might seem to be in order to protect artistic progress from the rage of the compact majority. . . the work [in this way] begins to lose its inner tension, and the wallpaper patterns and arithmetic problems which are threatening to render the aesthetic avant-

gardism of today harmless are not to be separated from the renunciation of the dialectic with the public, a dialectic which should not function as adaptation but as opposition."³

On the level of the musical material itself, Adorno explains his criticisms in essentially the same terms. He constantly speaks of the necessary dialectical opposition of content and form, of means and end, and of performer and music. The synthesis of these contrasts is, according to Adorno, perfect form, a form which grows out of these elements alone and which is not superimposed upon them. "The course of music in time. . . itself contradicts predeterminability." ". . . the primary musical impulse should produce at any given time the principle of its construction."⁴ In this respect it is only natural that Adorno regards the free atonality of Schönberg as his ideal, and denounces the complete serialization of today's modern music. He also observes that in addition to a lack of perfect form the idea of the completely predetermined is an illusion because music in this way can neither be constructed in absolute clarity nor does such construction coincide with the resulting actual music (1959c).

Interestingly enough, Adorno's view of such serialized music is applied in the same manner to chance music. "Music which is abstractly and mathematically dictated from without and which has no subjective mediation has an affinity to absolute chance. It is not unlikely that the youngest 'aleatoric' experiments manifest just that very thing."⁵ Adorno is also of the opinion that "the depreciation of the determined in favor of determinants appears especially flagrant in the area of

³"So notwendig solche Segregationen zuweilen sein mögen, um den künstlerischen Fortschritt vor der Wut der kompakten Majorität zu beschützen, . . . so beginnt die Sache in sich selbst ihre Spannung zu verlieren, und die Tapetenmuster und Rechenexempel, die den ästhetischen Avantgardismus heute drohend verharmlosen, sind nicht zu trennen von dem Verzicht auf eine Dialektik mit dem Publikum, die nicht in der Anpassung, sondern in deren Gegenteil bestehen müsste" (1959d:68).

⁴"Der Verlauf von Musik in der Zeit, . . . widerspricht selber der Prä-determiniertheit" (1959c:364-6). ". . . der primäre musikalische Impuls soll jeweils das Konstruktionsprinzip erzeugen" (1959c:363).

⁵"Die dem musikalischen Phänomen von aussen, ohne subjektive Vermittlung oktroyierte, abstrakt mathematisch sich gebärdende Notwendigkeit hat Affinität zum absoluten Zufall. Nicht unmöglich, dass die jüngsten 'aleatorischen' Experimente eben das bekunden" (1959c:350).

electronic music."⁶ Speaking of the music of the ultra-constructivists he states, "All this exaggerated articulation of the actual raw material of music is not inspired by any artistic aspirations; on the contrary the manipulation becomes an end in itself. . . . It results too, in the regression of music to the pre-musical pre-artistic stage of raw sound; it is only logical that the next step be concrete or electronic music" (1956a:25).

In accordance with the concept of perfect musical form created by contrasting elements, Adorno is very much concerned with the clear articulation of these elements in musical performance. Among his criticisms of performances of new music, and also his reasons for its unintelligibility to the public, are: not enough attention to melodic continuity and differentiated tone color; too-fast tempos; inadequacy of musical education on the part of the conductor and performers; and not enough rehearsal time due to the demands of unionism. Adorno claims that very often the non-understandability of the listeners is willfully confirmed by non-understandable performances (1959d:66). By non-understandability, Adorno is referring to the listener's inability to conceive the entire form because of the neutralization of the contrasting elements and the unclarity of the inarticulate performance. Indeed, according to Adorno it is only through the clear representation of the opposing elements and their perfectly balanced relationship that the true form can be perceived. This explains, at least in part, his early objections to the use of radio for the broadcasting of serious music so delicately conceived. This transmission of music only distorted its fine shadings and nuances and thereby destroyed its form (1941:110-139). Writing in 1958, however, after improvements were made in electronics, Adorno urges the use of the radio as a means of breaking the "intellectual monopoly of the cultural machine." With regard to new music he now urges that even rehearsals be broadcast so that the listener can hear the evolution of the musical form through the interpretation of the conductor (1959d:69-70).

Linked closely with his admiration for Schönberg's free atonality is Adorno's own concept of musical means—a sort of idealized counterpoint which is, again, characterized by the

⁶ ". . . die Entwertung des Determinierten zugunsten der Determinanten scheint besonders flagrant im Bereich der Elektronik" (1959c:361).

unity of contrasts. "As a synthesis of manifold elements the idea of counterpoint essentially is, in the truly Hegelian sense, identity of the non-identical."⁷ The end result for Adorno is a form which is *Durchkonstruiert* and which is free of all exterior and abstract form. The form grows out of the musical process itself and exists as a sectionless whole. In this way Adorno's concept of unity is realized. He is always quick to qualify this unity, however, by stressing that the individual voices must still maintain their independence. This explains some of his objections to the 12-tone technique, which he praises for its freeing of counterpoint from overt harmonic implications, while he at the same time points out its inherent dangers. "The 12-tone technique in which the spirit of counterpoint is accomplished contains also the potential of its death. The perfect determinability of voices, which are placed independently opposite one another [but] which are completely complementary, denies their own independence."⁸ The perfect determinability of voices, caused by their origin from a common source, i.e., the row, tends to diminish the contrasts to mere complementary relationships, with the antithetical nature of counterpoint perishing in the synthesis. The resulting unity of such material is a false one which Adorno calls "secondary form," the product of neutralization and liquidation of individuality.

We may smile at the bombastic way in which Adorno categorically condemns the music situation of today. However, as a sociologist, philosopher, writer, and musician his opinions certainly deserve attention, even though they are on a rather abstract, idealized plane. Whether or not we agree with his dark picture of a totalitarian state, whose inhabitants are both conditioned and driven by Freudian fears to repression and regression, we cannot deny Adorno's significance and accomplishments. Criticized by some as the arch-enemy of music, Adorno in many respects may be truly the most progressive

⁷"Als Synthesis des Mannigfaltigen war die Idee des Kontrapunkts wesentlich, im eigentlich Hegelschen Sinn, Identität des Nicht-Identischen" (1959a:239).

⁸"Die Zwölftontechnik, in welcher der Geist des Kontrapunkts sich vollendet, enthält auch das Potential von dessen Tod. Die vollkommene Determiniertheit der selbständig gegeneinander gesetzten, gänzlich komplementären Stimmen dementiert deren eigen Selbständigkeit" (1959a:238).

musical figure in the world today by virtue of his abhorrence of apathy in art.

While Adorno is dissatisfied with modern music as represented by Stockhausen and Boulez, he is even more opposed to the idea of turning back to history, as do the Neo-Classicists, in order to copy techniques and forms which grew out of past societies. Nor would he advocate turning back to the practices of Schönberg. For Adorno, progress is only forward, a constant dialectical process of change and motion. Although to sum up his basic philosophy in a phrase would certainly do him injustice, Adorno's ideas do seem to revolve around a central theme, namely, the unity of contrasts. Not only is the dialectical opposition of art to society a necessity for social truth, but the opposition of music to itself is a necessity for artistic truth. Only by opposing and expressing dissatisfaction with itself can music attain validity and unity. New music today is threatened by a relaxation of this essential ingredient through the loss of individuality and the fetishism of technique. Modern music is indeed growing old.

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