

MUSIC CRITICISM AND ADORNO

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Abstract — Résumé

This article considers the ambivalent ontology of and disciplinary space occupied by music criticism, using as special point of reference the music criticism practiced and advocated by Theodor Adorno. It tries to situate music criticism disciplinarily between the more institutionalized approaches of historical musicology and music theory and analysis and provides an historical overview of music criticism. By referring to two essays in *Quasi una Fantasia* ('Commodity Music Analysed' and 'Vers une musique informelle'), it attempts to show how Adorno's critical practice and philosophy of critical practice co-exist and, at times, contradict each other. Adorno's resistance to systematization of any kind is pointed out and the implications for music criticism as analysis are considered. The concept of the constellation as an alternative to

traditional logic and the crisis of language when interpreting music is discussed. Special attention is paid to the not inconsiderable challenges the Adornian text presents to the reader, and the relevancy of these texts in the present as a source of critical concepts, techniques and results. Lastly, the article also dwells on the position of the (music) critic vis-à-vis society as an enabling position for Adorno's so-called 'immanent' criticism by restating and interrogating some arguments in his essay in *Prisms*, 'Cultural Criticism and Society'. The Adornian alternatives of immanent criticism and transcendent criticism are explained through a close reading of this essay.

Key Words: music criticism; Theodor W. Adorno; immanent criticism; transcendent criticism; ideology; music and language.

When thinking of Adorno and music criticism, two strategies suggest themselves. The one is to look at the kind of criticism, cultural criticism in general and music criticism in particular, propagated by Adorno. It is, after all, difficult to overestimate the degree of his influence on musical thought in the twentieth century (whether one agrees with his views or not) and of the intellectual history of music

he constructed in his glittering constellations. But, as Adorno himself said, 'There is to be found in African students of political economy, Siamese at Oxford, and more generally in diligent art-historians and musicologists of petty-bourgeois origins, a ready inclination to combine with the assimilation of new material, an inordinate respect for all that is established, accepted, acknowledged'.¹ I propose, therefore, a second, non-believing strategy in confronting Adorno and music criticism, namely to look at the kind of criticism he actually wrote and not merely propagated. Whether I am doing so out of 'inordinate respect' for the opinion just expressed or in a show of critical indolence, is not a question I can answer.

I

To start off, it may be productive to consider what it is we understand when we create the compound 'music criticism'. Hans Keller had a very forthright view, writing that '[music] criticism could be argued to be the most self-evident phoney profession since witch-pricking, even though no innocents are killed in the process'.² Along with the work of the musicologist, the conductor, the opera producer, the viola player and a host of unfortunate others, music criticism is for Keller a phoney activity practiced by phoney professionals. Jacques Barzun describes the emergence of this 'phoney profession' as a sixteenth-century phenomenon as follows:

Aesthetic appreciation is something more than spontaneous liking; a good eye for accurate representation is not enough; one must be able to judge and talk about style, technique, and originality. This demand gives rise to a new public character: the critic. The future professional begins by being simply the gifted art lover who compares, sees fine points, and works up a vocabulary for his perceptions. He and his kind are not theorists but connoisseurs and ultimately experts.³

Note the transition here from private to public reflection, a fact also remarked upon by Terry Eagleton when he writes that 'Through its relationship with the reading public, critical reflection loses its private character'.⁴ In an uncommonly lucid passage from 'Late Work Without Late Style', Adorno glosses Barzun's historical 'demand' that led to the rise of the critic in the imperatives of the present:

¹ Theodor W. ADORNO, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, tr. E.F.N. Jephcott (London & New York: Verso, 1978), 52; Germ. edn., *Minima Moralia* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1951).

² Hans KELLER, *Criticism* (London: Faber, 1987), 30.

³ Jacques BARZUN, *From Dawn to Decadence, 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 71.

⁴ Terry EAGLETON, *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso, 1984), 10.

To speak seriously of [music] can be nothing other than, in Brecht's phrase, to alienate it; to rupture the aura of unfocused veneration protectively surrounding it, and thereby perhaps to contribute something to an authentic experience of it beyond the paralyzing respect of the culture sphere. The attempt to do so must necessarily use criticism as medium; qualities which traditional awareness uncritically ascribe to the *Missa Solemnis* must be tested, to prepare for a perception of its content — a task which quite certainly no one has yet performed. The aim is not to debunk, to topple approved greatness for the sake of doing so. The disillusioning gesture which sustains itself on the prominence against which it is directed is enslaved by that very prominence. But criticism, in face of a work of such stature and of Beethoven's entire oeuvre, can be nothing other than a means of unfolding the work, fulfilment of a duty towards the matter itself, not the gratified sneer at finding one thing less to respect in the world. To point this out is necessary because neutralized culture itself ensures that, while the works are not perceived in an original way but are merely consumed as something socially approved, the names of their authors are taboo. Rage is automatically aroused when reflection on the work threatens to touch on the authority of the person.⁵

Ambiguity surrounds the nature of music criticism. It is neither purely historical musicology, nor is it analysis in the way musicologists understand the term. As Adorno writes in the previously cited paragraph, criticism is aimed at disturbing and disrupting 'the aura of veneration', and yet it contains an impulse of 'consolidation' or 'cementing a power bloc', the dimension of 'fulfilment of a duty towards the matter'. 'A critic may write with assurance as long as the critical institution itself is thought to be unproblematic', writes Terry Eagleton.⁶ Criticism, and this includes music criticism, may be described as 'the translation and grading of an aesthetic experience by means of intellectual analysis and imaginative inquiry.'⁷ Because it deals with two sets of material, that of the artist and the words of the critique, the critic is bound to make extensive use of metaphor. So is criticism that which reviewers do in newspapers, or what Adorno practices in his 'fragments'? Is it 'analysis' and if so, what kind of analysis: the so-called 'immanent' analysis that Adorno advocates and arguably infrequently practices, or sociological or philosophical analysis? Or analysis that is heavily systematized, like Set Theory analysis or Schenker analysis or Hans Keller's functional analysis, which is 'notes about notes'. These questions imply another set of questions: Is criticism practiced by the philosopher, the scholar, the historian, or the press critic? Are these categories mutually exclusive? Should they be? Perhaps they are interrelated, as Meyer Greene's categories of criticism, the re-creative, the historical and the judicial, sug-

⁵ Theodor W. ADORNO, 'Late Work Without Late Style', in: *Beethoven: the Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf TIEDERMANN, tr. E. F. N. Jephcott (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 138-53, esp. 142.

⁶ T. EAGLETON, *The Function of Criticism*, [7].

⁷ Winton DEAN, 'Criticism', in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), vol. 5, 44.

gest.⁸ Perhaps criticism lies in the bridging of the gap between technical analysis and the sociological critique and philosophical interpretation of particular musical works, something that Adorno often fails to achieve himself.⁹ Or perhaps it is an alternative to analysis. Has it got something to do with reception or performance? Is it necessarily extra-musical textual criticism — something in the line of critical cultural theory? Has it got something to do with perspectives, with events, with consumption, with the public, with 'todayness', with periodization and/or canonization? How does it relate to critique (i.e. the act or art of criticizing), if we remember Kant's pronouncement that 'There is no science of the beautiful, but only a Critique'.¹⁰ And to Critical Theory, especially as we are talking about a philosopher who was part of the so-called Frankfurt School where critical theory dictated that 'Every one-sided doctrine is to be subjected to criticism' and strove to trace the origins of all theory and its concepts and 'not accept them'.¹¹ Where does this critical mistrust of positivism as riddled with non-theoretical interests and the rejection of science as value-free, find its place in cultural criticism, or music criticism, or just criticism? These questions are asked not in order to suggest that I shall provide answers, or indeed that clear-cut answers are possible, but to indicate the extent to which criticism in music is a contested concept that operates in many different contexts and spills over into as many areas of musical scholarship to become (part of) those areas of thought and investigation.

The term 'criticism' has strong resonances with practices inherited from literary studies, where one could define literary criticism as the art 'devoted to the comparison and analysis, to the interpretation and evaluation of works of literature'.¹² Perhaps one should note that music criticism as hermeneutics has always lagged behind criticism in the other arts, and it might well have something to do with 'the elusiveness of musical material and the elements of sound and time in which it operates [that] make it difficult to record accurately even now, almost impossible to describe in words, and therefore highly unamenable to criticism'.¹³ From the late-nineteenth century onwards I think this critical hesitancy, if one could call it that, could also be understood to have something to do with the intimidating conceits of the autonomy of the musical work. Winton Dean links the origins of a

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹ Max Paddison's opinion. See M. PADDISON, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 264.

¹⁰ Immanuel KANT, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 172; Germ. edn., *Kritik der Urteilsskraft* (Prussia, 1790).

¹¹ Ted HONDERICH (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 290.

¹² J.A. CUDDON, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 1982), 207.

¹³ W. DEAN, 'Criticism', in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 37.

music criticism to the first irregular appearances of the daily and periodical press in the late seventeenth century, and it is therefore little wonder that Adorno directs the satire in his essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society' — the focus of the third part of this chapter — on the journalistic critic of culture, who would traditionally have been 'either amateurs interested in literature, aesthetics or social science, or ... musicians who were amateurs in all else, including the processes of thought and verbal expression.'¹⁴

In music the pioneer of criticism was the Hamburg theorist Johann Mattheson, who could rank as the first modern music critic.¹⁵ By the end of the eighteenth century the influential Leipzig publication, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* was founded and it was in periodicals of this kind that new music by Mozart, Beethoven and Haydn were first criticized. Dean writes that the tone of the critics 'lowered as their audience expanded' (something, incidentally, that Adorno also remarks upon) and analogies between music and the other arts still abound.

The nineteenth century saw music criticism appearing in daily press for concert notices and articles, as well as the emergence of the composer-critic, among the first of whom were Liszt and Weber, not to forget Schumann's writing in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and Berlioz, an erratic critic whom Dean calls 'probably the only great composer who might have reached equal stature in literature, and one of the few music critics who can be read with pleasure for their style alone.'¹⁶ The middle of the nineteenth century shows the towering figure of Eduard Hanslick, who for 50 years dominated the world of Viennese musical journalism in the *Presse* and *Neue freie Presse* as well as the memorable language of Bernard Shaw who was an avid Wagnerian and an active London music critic for six years.

The early twentieth century saw radical changes in the language of music, and in music criticism this resulted in the serious critic, closely following the composer, parting company with the public, whereas the journalist, trying to keep up communication with the public, often lost sight of the composer and modern music. Serious criticism began to receive the benefits of the research of the great German musicologists, begun about the middle of the nineteenth century. It is here whence the impulse derives for a criticism that is recognizably more than mere journalism, a discursive mode that arguably retains the immediacy of words applied to music and a narrative form, but becomes less reportage than interpretation. And it is here where we pick up on Adorno and his view of the cultural critic, as well as the kind of criticism that he practiced and preached, as it were.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37. This historical account is based on Dean's article in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

II

When Adorno gives us the measure of Rachmaninoff's C sharp minor Prelude, he devotes a lengthy three paragraphs to his criticism. I provide a truncated citation, in which we learn that:

... there are passages familiar from pieces for children and from school concerts which are marked 'grandioso' ... It sounds tremendously difficult and at all events very loud. But it is comfortingly easy to play: the child knows that the colossal effect cannot misfire and that he is assured in advance of a triumph that has been achieved without effort. The Prelude preserves this triumph for infantile adults ... In their mind's eye they can see their lion's paws growing. Psychoanalysts have discovered the Nero complex. The Prelude gratifies this from the outset. It allows the megalomaniac free play, without pinning him down to anything definite ... Almost all tonal music, especially that of the pre-Classical era, provides the contemporary amateur with the opportunity to make his own gesture of power in the final cadence. This is an affirmative statement which says: so be it. It is an affirmation as such, whatever has gone before ... The Prelude is just one long final cadence; it could be described as a single, long, insatiable, repetitive ritardando. It parodies the passacaglia progression by taking three cadence-forming bass notes which can conclude the theme of a passacaglia, and presents them, as it were, as a passacaglia theme. Repetition insists on the point with ruthless self-advertisement. The phrases are so short-winded that even the most insensitive ear can scarcely go wrong. Moreover, the motif-forming melodic counter-voice merely paraphrases the cadence. All the music does say is: so be it. The fact that we don't know what is to be is what constitutes the essence of its Russian mysticism.¹⁷

We read this criticism as an entertaining and illuminating narrative that is fed by intellectual streams as far afield as psychoanalysis and sociology. The latter represents a gesture that takes music away from itself and effects a more broadly based intellectual discourse — a crucial critical strategy. It is a narrative that runs parallel to an immediate musical perception and one that grapples with music that analysis has traditionally shied away from because of its unamenability to systematization and the claims of an historical intellectual history with regard to the development of musical material. It is also a narrative that takes the music as a critical point of departure to justify and further develop a particular intellectual grasp of music history. In so doing, it slots the music into what it regards as its 'proper place'.

What is also interesting here is the relationship between analysis and criticism, although what we read here could easily be differentiated from analysis by

¹⁷ Th. W. ADORNO, 'Commodity Music Analysed', in: *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (London & New York: Verso, 1998), 37-52, esp. 38-40; Germ. edn., *Quasi una fantasia* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963).

invoking Benjamin Boretz's dichotomy between theoretical and observational terms. No doubt Boretz would also dismiss this kind of writing as 'non-cognitive' music criticism.¹⁸ We read in this passage more detail than that with which Adorno usually graces his interpretations of music. The detail falls short of full-blown analysis as we understand the term, but it is in balance with the claims he proceeds to make. As in his criticism of Schoenberg's 'running for cover' from the free atonality of the second decade of the twentieth century to the strict serialism of the 1920s, Adorno's criticism of Schenker is not the degree of detail invoked as a method of criticism, but the *systematization* of that detail:

Schenker's lasting achievement as an analyst is and remains the fact that he was the first to demonstrate the constitutive importance of tonal relationships, as understood in the widest sense, for the concrete shape of a composition — an achievement which stands in curious contrast to his cult of genius. Imprisoned in his dogmatic approach, however, he failed to perceive the countervailing force. This was the fact that the tonal idiom does not just 'compose' of its own volition, but that it actually obstructs the specific conception of the composer as soon as the moment of classical unity of both elements has vanished. Dazzled by the idiom, he hypostatized it and, notwithstanding insights into structure which have affinities with Schoenberg's practice, he strove to establish for a reactionary aesthetics a solid foundation in musical logic which tallied all too well with his loathsome political views.¹⁹

This is a criticism of Schenker's system as a method of criticism that in its formalism creates as many analytical problems as it answers critical ones. Nonetheless, we note in Adorno's criticism of the Rachmaninoff Prelude many of the characteristics of his musical aesthetics in general: the musical sensibility, the power of aphorism and the fragment, the construct of the social on which his interpretation tacitly rests, the silent ideological narrative of music history as a specifically German history, the dynamic of a focus telescoping radically in and out from philosophical premise to detail of musical construction and vice versa and, as said, the refusal to commit to systematic analysis of the musical text. Also, to use an argument made by Matthew Brown and Douglas Dempster in another context, Adorno's writing is criticism and not analysis because it is 'essentially descriptive: it simply provides us with musically interesting descriptions of individual pieces of music'. Brown and Dempster continue: '... such analyses explain nothing — they surely do not explain some essential uniqueness of a given piece.'²⁰

¹⁸ See in this regard Matthew BROWN and Douglas J. DEMPSTER's 'The Scientific Image of Music Theory', in: *Journal of Music Theory*, 33:1 (1989), 65-106, esp. 76.

¹⁹ Th. W. ADORNO, 'Vers une musique informelle', in: *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, 269-322, esp. 281.

²⁰ M. BROWN and D. J. DEMPSTER, 'The Scientific Image of Music Theory', in: *Journal of Music Theory*, 95.

It is not unreasonable in a world of structure (I am thinking here of the Marxian thought fundamental to Adorno's aesthetics) to look for logic (even if it is the logic of the irrational), causality, linearity and, ultimately, answers.²¹ Yet we find in Adorno's intractable writing a resistance to linear interpretation. As Max Paddison writes, 'For Adorno, truth lies in the particular which evades the universalizing tendency of conceptual thought.'²² In fact, what one finds in Adorno's aesthetics is an alternative to traditional logic which is presented in the form of the 'constellation', which was in due course to become his famous 'negative dialectics'. Adorno describes the idea of 'constellations' as follows:

It is not a matter of clarifying concepts out of one another, but of the constellation of ideas ... One does not refer back to these ideas as 'invariants'; the issue is not to define them, rather they gather around a concrete historical facticity that, in the context of these elements, will reveal itself in its uniqueness.²³

Adorno's 'concepts' are of dual character and are mainly focused on the relation between history and nature and the rupture between self and forms.²⁴ But even though a basic understanding of the Adornian concepts and intellectual context is required when attempting a reading of his texts, his writing is difficult to come to grips with even if one approaches his texts prepared. Among students first encountering his work, my experience is that accusations of 'stylistic obscurantism and methodological inconsistency'^{24a} are not uncommon. But there are also scholarly detractors. In a recent instance, Roger Scruton asks:

I wonder whether I am alone in seeing Adorno's musicology as empty attitudinizing, his sociology of music as a mechanical application of the Marxian theory of ideology, unredeemed by any attempt at real musical analysis, and his defence of twelve-tone serialism as little more than a mask for his own musical sterility ... just where in Adorno's jargon-ridden, joke-free pages [should we] look for a 'towering feat' of musical criticism [?]²⁵

A common objection is Adorno's intractable ('jargon-ridden') prose: a difficult, obstinate and seemingly purposeful stacking of paradoxes, antimony, long and clumsy sentence construction (in part the result of translations from his mostly German writing),²⁶ ellipses, hyperbole and a resulting degree of abstraction that belies his judgment that 'Idealism can be overcome only when the freedom to con-

²¹ For Adorno's definition of causality, see 'The Sociology of Knowledge and its Consciousness', in: *Prisms* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 35-49, esp. 45; Germ. edn., *Prismen* (Berlin, 1967).

²² M. PADDISON, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

^{24a} Paddison's words. *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁵ Roger SCRUTON, 'Letters to the Editor', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 October 2003, 19.

²⁶ See Samuel M. WEBBER's 'On translating the untranslatable', in: *Prisms*, 11-5.

ceptualize through abstraction is sacrificed.²⁷ For Adorno, truth is most effectively attainable in the 'fragment', the detail that implodes the false totality of reality. Therefore his aphorism: 'das Ganze is das Unwahre' (the whole is the false).²⁸ Adorno forces us to face the impotence of language to conceptualize music. As Max Paddison writes:

The contradiction at the heart of Adorno's whole enterprise, and one which is directly linked to the stylistic virtuosity of his writing, is that, for a philosopher, the only access to the non-conceptual is via the concept. This, to use a favourite phrase of Adorno's is what constitutes the *tour de force* of his texts — that they attempt to use the power of the concept to undermine the concept and thereby enable the non-conceptual to speak. For Adorno, the epitome of the 'non-conceptual' and 'non-identical' is art, and in particular the 'autonomous' music of the bourgeois period, regarded as a mode of 'cognition without concepts'. Thus the interpretation of music and of musical works hits up against the problem of conceptualizing the non-conceptual, of 'identifying the non-identical', in its most extreme form.²⁹

But language is all we have to take up the challenges of musical meaning. The domain in which this happens can be described as either theory, analysis, historiography or music criticism. Analysts like Heinrich Schenker have tried to minimize the contribution of language to our comprehension of musical 'truth', but eventually even Schenkerian analytical frameworks depend on language (some would even say they are poetic). Adorno's 'thick' writing and superpositioning of meanings are efforts to overcome this intellectual articulation-disability. Even though the complexity of the Adornian text provides little options other than to dissect his writing in order to arrive at the system that exists on its own terms in the subcutaneous layers of the writing, it is worth remembering that meaning is lost when Adorno's thought is staged as an uninterrupted linear sequence.

Like medical students dissecting a cadaver to identify the elements of human anatomy, the Adornian text can be carefully taken apart. But in the same way that dissection precludes the possibility of seeing human physiology in action with regard to the dissected cadaver, we cannot hope to see the dialectical character of Adorno's thought in action when working with segments of text. There are meanings in Adorno that function only on a macro-level, where two words assume meaning only when they are not separated, when two paragraphs make sense only in juxtaposition and when a thought process becomes possible only because of the paradoxes and veils that surround it. Adorno teaches the music critic that it

²⁷ Th. W. ADORNO, 'The Sociology of Knowledge and its Consciousness', in: *Prisms*, 43.

²⁸ Th. W. ADORNO, *Minima Moralia*, 50. Parts of Section II are adapted and slightly changed from my 'Contemporary South African Interfaces with Aspects of Adornian thought', *Ars Nova*, vol. 33 & 34 (2001 & 2002), 30-5, esp. 31.

²⁹ M. PADDISON, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, 15.

is sometimes necessary to write 5000 words in order to formulate one insight that brings us a step closer to understanding. And often that understanding is not a conclusion, but an awareness. We should pause here to consider the implications for the kind of theoretical work we are prepared to entertain in our discipline and that we are prepared to publish. Theorizing is by its very nature abstract and often extremely complicated, so that an insistence on an 'easy' and readable critical theory and music criticism, a refrain often sounded by musicological colleagues, is tantamount to a call for no critical theory at all.

There is one further dimension of Adorno's music criticism that I should like to note in concluding this section. Looking at the writing in an essay like 'Vers une musique informelle', one is struck by Adorno's dislike of system, his understanding of freedom as a necessary condition of truth and an inevitable trust in the tendencies of material (musical as well as critical). It is this *ad hoc* criticism, coupled with a broad philosophical, historical trajectory of thought, that makes for the oddly prophetic nature of his criticism and that is perhaps also responsible for the degree to which postmodern theorists have found his thinking irresistible and problematic in almost equal degree. When I heard, for the first time, South African composer Michael Blake's *String Quartet in Memory of William Burton* when it was premiered by the Fitzwilliam Quartet in 2001 in Grahamstown, Adorno's writing on 'informal music' immediately came to mind. I found the conditions of this music to resonate with the Adornian ideas expressed in this essay; ideas about the intervention of the subject that does not result in domination of the tendency of the material. I use this example specifically to underline the fact that Adorno is not, as is sometimes implied, incompatible with the dynamics of the postmodern, and specifically the South African post-many-other-things. It is not necessary to adopt Adorno in all of his problematic historical and philosophical stances to make use of some of his formidable musical insights. In fact, other than, say, the music criticism of a Hanslick or Shaw, Adorno's music criticism points beyond the music to a philosophy of music, as much as Schenker's music criticism points beyond the music to the norm of the system. It is, in many ways, a music criticism in which music is simultaneously subject and instrument.

III

My last focus is to move to a particular enabling aspect of criticism — also, but not exclusively of music criticism — namely the *position* of the critic as discussed by Adorno in his essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society' from *Prisms*.³⁰ I will offer a

³⁰ Th. W. ADORNO, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in: *Prisms* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 19-34; Germ. edn., *Prismen* (Berlin, 1967).

close reading of sections of this essay, that theorizes the position of the critic in relation to certain other variables before it moves on to an exposition of the nature of immanent criticism as opposed to transcendent criticism.

Winton Dean writes about a 'dualism — the taking part and standing aside — that lies at the centre of criticism.'³¹ Adorno likewise introduces his essay by denouncing the concept 'cultural critic' as a contradiction in terms. The cultural critic is the spokesperson for 'unadulterated nature' or a 'higher historical age', yet he is of the same essence as that to which he pretends to be superior. By invoking the concepts of 'distance' and 'unity', with regard to subject and object, Adorno is already introducing the opposites that frame the dialectic of his own cultural criticism.

Adorno identifies three role-players in his constructed dialectic, namely the cultural critic, culture and the 'status quo'. He assumes what he terms a 'difference' between the cultural critic and the 'prevailing disorder', and he also distinguishes between the 'culture industry' (which aspires to the position of culture) and culture itself. This distinction lies at the heart of Adorno's dialectic engaging consumerism and culture. The 'culture industry', like culture, is defined by the 'difference' that the cultural critic (who is part of the 'culture industry') strives to put between himself and the 'prevailing disorder'. The reason for culture's efforts to delineate firm boundaries between itself and the 'status quo' is that such distinction exempts it from evaluation against the material conditions of life. Adorno is positing a scenario in which culture exists side-by-side with the 'status quo' — a scenario in which evaluation by comparison is not only possible but perhaps inevitable. By removing culture to a position where comparison between culture and the 'prevailing disorder' ('status quo') is obstructed by distance, evaluation becomes more difficult. Culture's claim to distinction or difference is seen by Adorno as its exaggerated claim. This claim inheres 'in the movement of the mind', that receives its own discrete position in this constellation.

The cultural critic, argues Adorno, makes the creation of distance his task. In doing this, he compromises his own position in the material world. This compromised, *distanced* position inevitably affects the substance of criticism. Even when it speaks the truth about an untrue consciousness,³² it remains 'imprisoned within the orbit of that against which it struggles' and therefore cannot escape from fixation on the mere surface manifestations of that untrue consciousness. The metaphor, 'being trapped in orbit', illustrates how the substance of the criticism can never go beyond that which it criticizes.

³¹ W. DEAN, 'Criticism', in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 47.

³² This untrue consciousness can be described as culture removed from the 'status quo' by objective reasoning. Alternatively it can denote 'contaminated consciousness' as a result of culture's subservience to the 'prevailing disorder'.

Exploring the myth of intellectual freedom and the relationship between criticism and culture, Adorno invokes a specific historical example. He describes how criticism was muzzled by the Nazi's and replaced by 'art appreciation', because criticism proved that it could powerfully oppose the more overt form of political slavery. According to Adorno, such opposition occurs naturally because the critic assumes an autonomy (in the sovereign gesture of the 'negative moment') which arrogantly assumes a position of leadership which is incompatible with his (the critic's) real position of compromised intellectual freedom. Totalitarian political establishments are attracted by the pretence of strength and dictatorial bearing of the cultural critic. Politicians therefore easily succumb to the same naiveté as critics, namely the faith in culture as a reified entity. The Nazis became 'physicians' who removed the 'thorn' of cultural criticism from culture as a reified entity. Culture in the Third Reich became Official to the extent that culture and criticism (which are *de facto* intertwined) were separated and criticism was 'killed off'. We are reminded of Dean's remark that 'There is no such thing as democracy in art, nor can there be in criticism; doctrinaire ideology is the mortal enemy of both. One of the critic's roles is that of watchdog, and he must bark as appropriate.'³³

In the second section of this essay Adorno states the case for an immanent criticism. Immanent criticism of culture can, according to Adorno, easily overlook the decisive role of ideology in social conflicts. One has to assume that this is because it chooses to remain embedded within boundaries — firstly of culture alone but also of the material conditions of life. To suppose an independent 'logic of culture' (culture feigning independence from the 'status quo'), is to perpetuate a false stability of culture as a separate epiphenomenon. Immanent criticism is vulnerable on the charge that it rests on just such a supposition. The need for an ideology critique is formulated in the basic Marxian notion that the substance of culture resides not in culture alone (as immanent criticism would have it), but also in relation to 'something external, to the material life-processes'. To ignore this is to play into the hands of ideology and to establish ideology as the basic matter and the final truth in cultural matters. One can thus reason that immanent criticism establishes ideology by overlooking it. To remedy this situation, immanent criticism should retain a certain 'mobility' with regard to culture by recognizing culture's position within the whole. This also implies the freedom of the mind to transcend culture. As Adorno puts it, the 'spontaneous movement of the object can only be followed by someone not entirely engulfed by it'. This is the answer of 'immanent criticism' to the 'traditional demand' of ideology critique, which is according to Adorno, also subject to the processes of history.

Adorno maintains that the function of ideologies has become increasingly abstract in the twentieth century. Ideology now functions only as 'filler' to the void

³³ W. DEAN, 'Criticism', in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 48.

left by a lack of good education and a 'shackled consciousness'. Culture has become ideological as the subjectively devised manifestations of private life. The usage of terms like 'autonomy' and 'privacy' in connection with culture conceals the fact that private life 'drags on only as an appendage of the social process.' The task of cultural criticism is therefore to interpret 'general social tendencies through which the most powerful interests realize themselves.' This seismic paradigmatic shift from tracing ideological base causes of always dependant superstructures on the one hand, to a hermeneutic survey of the social landscape on the other, is proposed by Adorno when he writes that 'Cultural criticism must become social physiognomy'.

The alternatives to a criticism that tries to decipher the general social tendencies which are expressed in intellectual phenomena (which to Adorno's mind is the only thing criticism can still aspire to), are either to call culture as a whole into question from the outside under the general notion of ideology, or to confront culture with the norms which it itself has crystallized. These alternatives, which can be labeled transcendent criticism and immanent criticism respectively, cannot be accepted by cultural theory. Adorno would have us believe that the 'either-or' choice between immanence and transcendence is rendered unnecessary by dialectics that advocates 'intransigence towards all reification'. The transcendent method which aims at totality seems more radical than the immanent method which presupposes the 'questionable whole'. The Archimedean position of the transcendent method on the idea of the 'whole' (and therefore on the immanent method which presupposes a questionable 'wholeness') is in fact that the 'semblance of unity and wholeness in the world grows with the advance of reification, that is division.' The transcendent method thrives on creating divisions in order to demonstrate the interrelationships of the whole and thus to suggest a redefined 'natural' totality. However, the acceptance of the fact that the concept of ideology has changed to mean 'society itself', and the acceptance of the idea of society's 'existence-in-itself' that 'surrogates the meaning which that existence has exterminated', threaten the point of view that divisions are possible. If this premise of Adorno's is accepted (with regard to the omnipresence of ideology), then it follows that any position 'outside the sway of existing society' from where a critique can be practiced, is a fictitious concept. Even the premise of transcendent criticism, namely a presumed state of 'naturalness', is a central element of bourgeois ideology and is therefore ideological. The transcendent attack on culture, mostly to be associated with socialist points of departure, maintains that culture corrupts the 'naturalness' of life. This attack 'speaks the language of false escape' according to Adorno, as it posits a culture (and therefore a life) more natural than that produced.³⁴ Socialism, in wish-

³⁴ Although Adorno singles out socialist systems in this regard, this transcendental approach is equally at home in capitalist consumer culture where cultural phenomena are required to suit the preformed needs of consumers. In both instances transcendent criticism attacks cultural objects which do not conform to the 'status quo'.

ing to reform the 'whole', develops an affinity with barbarism ('the more primitive' and the 'undifferentiated'). The blanket rejection of culture (as corrupt) becomes a pretext for promoting the side of society in the everlasting conflict between society and the individual. From there it is, according to Adorno, only a short step to complete the 'official reinstatement of a thoroughly repressive culture'.

Adorno regards immanent criticism as the more dialectical of the two options. It proceeds from the understanding that it is not ideology itself that is untrue, but rather ideology's pretence to correspond to reality. 'Immanent criticism of artistic and intellectual phenomena seeks to grasp, through the analysis of their form and meaning, the contradiction between their objective idea and that pretension.'³⁵ The goal of immanent criticism is therefore to define the space between ideology and reality. Immanent criticism names what a cultural work (the 'consistency or inconsistency' thereof) expresses of the 'structure of the existent'. Inconsistencies and 'inadequacies' in the cultural work do not become the oversight of the individual, but rather the intriguing 'irreconcilability of the object's moments', the 'logic of its aporias' and the 'insolubility of the task itself'. In the antinomies of culture, immanent criticism perceives the antinomies of society.

The successful work, for immanent criticism, is therefore not the one that conforms to society by resolving 'objective contradictions in a spurious harmony', but one that 'expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromized, in its innermost structure.'³⁶ Although the presupposition of fixed identities of subject and object is not suggested by the dialectical process, it remains necessary to be aware of the 'duality of the moments'. The duality is the knowledge of society as a totality (and the mind's involvement in it) on the one hand and the claim 'inherent in the specific content of an object that it be apprehended as such', on the other. It is the right of dialectics to move from group to group within the whole, to shed light on the 'hermetic' object by taking society into account and to hold society responsible for that which the object says about it but cannot hope to change. Having thus described the dialectics of immanent criticism, Adorno arrives at the point where he states that the very opposition between approaching something 'from without' on the one hand, and 'from within' on the other, is anathema to the dialectical method. Accepting the concepts 'outside' and 'inside' would be to accept reification — something that the dialectical method opposes. The 'abstract categorizing' of the transcendent method and the fetishism of the object which is indifferent to its roots (immanence) thus share a certain blindness. The latter threatens to become idealism — the former rests content with a prescribed label ('culture'), the abusive accusation, the edicts dispatched from a distance.

³⁵ Th. W. ADORNO, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in: *Prisms*, 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

Mechanically functioning categories divide the world into 'black and white' entities that invite domination in direct contrast to the spirit in which such concepts were once conceived. 'No theory, not even that which is true, is safe from perversion into delusion once it has renounced a *spontaneous* relation to the object' (my italics).³⁷ The dialectical critic has to guard against this no less than against 'enthrallment in the cultural object' — underwriting neither the cult of the mind nor hatred of the mind. The dialectical critic — and from this the music critic is not exempt — must, according to Adorno, both participate in culture and not participate and therefore be inside and outside at the same time.

* * *

Music criticism practiced from an intellectual base ignorant of these theoretical considerations surely cannot be considered music criticism proper, irrespective of its register or conventional constraints. It is certainly conceivable that intellectually informed music criticism can be both journalistic and philosophical; that its ideal practitioners include all such professionals that have a sense of the intricacy and subtleness of the act of criticism and its protean guises and sophisticated position vis-à-vis art, culture and society; that prose narrative does not disqualify it from being considered 'analysis' (even if that means expanding musicology's understanding of that recently much maligned term to benefit the concept as such); that music criticism can be both a record of reception and intellectual performance of music, thereby adding to its significance and meaning; that as performance it pursues historical meaning from the vantage point of the present; that 'immanent' criticism is in fact a sophisticated instrument to dismantle the dichotomy of the musical and the extra-musical; that it is one of the cogs in the wheel of canonization merely by fixing in writing that which is temporary. And so, ultimately, we return to the many unanswered questions posed at the beginning of this chapter with seemingly modest rewards. But perhaps the provisionality of these answers suggest at least one more assertive conclusion: that music criticism as we would like it to be is unthinkable without Adorno's contribution. That somewhere in his 'jargon-ridden, joke-free pages' some of us keep on discovering the techniques, the concepts and the results of a music criticism to aspire to.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

Sažetak

GLAZBENA KRITIKA I ADORNO

Glazbena kritika je ambivalentni naziv za disciplinu: to nije analiza kako taj termin podrazumijevaju muzikolozi, niti dijeli tradicionalno zanimanje za metodu i sadržaj historijske muzikologije. Ona predlaže način diskursa koji je djelatan, koji se bavi hermeneutikom i koji u prednji plan stavlja problem jezika kao posrednika u glazbenom značenju. U ovom se članku daje kratak pregled glazbene kritike od njezinih ranih novinskih oblika to ozbiljnijih pojava u kasnom 19. stoljeću prije nego što se raspravi o doprinosu Theodora W. Adorna u 20. stoljeću. Adorno je prakticirao kritiku koja nije sadržavala analizu, ali je ipak donio prodorne uvide u gustom proznom stilu. Parafrazirana verzija njegove rasprave o *Preludiju* u cis-molu S. Rahmanjinova iz eseja 'Analizirana potrošna glazba' (uzetog iz djela *Quasi una Fantasia*) ilustrira kako njegova kritika aktivira komplementarna disciplinarna polja, kako je njegova filozofija glazbe 20. stoljeća, ispunjena predrasudama, utjecala na njegovu kritiku i kako je svojom oštrom glazbenom percepcijom istražio granice između kritike i analize. Adornov otpor prema sistematizaciji pojedinosti u velikoj je mjeri spriječio njegovu kritiku da postane analizom, što je također razlogom njegove razorne kritike metode Heinricha Schenkera. Ovaj otpor nalazi svoj izraz u potvrđivanju fragmenta, kontradiktornoj retorici i namjerno neprobojnom proznom stilu koji nas sili da priznamo ograničenja jezika u raspravljanju o glazbi. Esej 'Vers une musique informelle' ('Prema jednoj enformelskoj glazbi', također preuzet iz djela *Quasi una Fantasia*), ilustrira još jednu dimenziju Adornove kritičke odvažnosti: iz toga proizašlo proročko nagnuće s obzirom na svoj sadržaj i na problematike uključene u kritiku. Ono što čini Adorna obvezatnim čitanjem za kritiku o suvremenoj glazbi je ta osjetljivost na krizu značenja koja se javlja kad se riječi približavaju glazbi, ali i pojmovni prostori otkriveni njegovim teoretiziranjem, prostori koji funkcioniraju kao mjesta rezervirana za buduća značenja. Jedan od najvrjednijih modela za konceptualizaciju kritičkoga čina nalazi se u eseju 'Kritika kulture i društvo' (uzetog iz djela *Prizme*). Adorno teoretizira o zasebnim bićima kritike kulture, same kulture i 'status quoa'. On ih smješta u vlastiti dijalektički trokut koji jamči odvojenu relativnu autonomiju svake od ovih sfera, a da im ne dopušta potpunu autonomiju funkcioniranja u međusobnoj izolaciji. Rezultirajući pojam imanentne kritike uspoređuje se s alternativnom transcendentnom kritikom, a oba se uspoređuju s obzirom na njihov odnos spram ideologije. Adorno razmatra prednosti i nedostatke ovih dvaju kritičkih modela i donosi odluku da je među njima imanentna metoda dijalektičnija.