

Essays on Music

THEODOR W. ADORNO

Selected, with Introduction, Commentary, and Notes

BY RICHARD LEPPERT

New translations by Susan H. Gillespie

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Contents

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<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Translator's Note</i>	xiii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xvii
Introduction (by Richard Leppert)	1
1. LOCATING MUSIC: SOCIETY, MODERNITY, AND THE NEW	
Commentary (by Richard Leppert)	85
Music, Language, and Composition (1956)	113
Why Is the New Art So Hard to Understand?* (1931)	127
On the Contemporary Relationship of Philosophy and	
Music* (1953)	135
On the Problem of Musical Analysis (1969)	162
The Aging of the New Music (1955)	181
The Dialectical Composer* (1934)	203
2. CULTURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND LISTENING	
Commentary (by Richard Leppert)	213
The Radio Symphony (1941)	251
The Curves of the Needle (1927/1965)	271

An asterisk (*) following a title indicates that the essay is here translated into English for the first time.

The Form of the Phonograph Record (1934)	277
Opera and the Long-Playing Record (1969)	283
On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening (1938)	288
Little Heresy* (1965)	318
3. MUSIC AND MASS CULTURE	
Commentary (by Richard Leppert)	327
What National Socialism Has Done to the Arts (1945)	373
• On the Social Situation of Music (1932)	391
On Popular Music [With the assistance of George Simpson] (1941)	437
On Jazz (1936)	470
Farewell to Jazz* (1933)	496
Kitsch* (c. 1932)	501
• Music in the Background* (c. 1934)	506
4. COMPOSITION, COMPOSERS, AND WORKS	
Commentary (by Richard Leppert)	513
• Late Style in Beethoven (1937)	564
Alienated Masterpiece: The <i>Missa Solemnis</i> (1959)	569
Wagner's Relevance for Today (1963)	584
Mahler Today* (1930)	603
Marginalia on Mahler* (1936)	612
The Opera <i>Wozzeck</i> * (1929)	619
Toward an Understanding of Schoenberg* (1955/1967)	627
Difficulties* (1964, 1966)	644
<i>Bibliography</i>	681
<i>Source and Copyright Acknowledgments</i>	709
<i>Index</i>	713

Preface and Acknowledgments

In his text, the writer sets up house. Just as he trundles papers, books, pencils, documents untidily from room to room, he creates the same disorder in his thoughts. They become pieces of furniture that he sinks into, content or irritable. He strokes them affectionately, wears them out, mixes them up, re-arranges, ruins them.

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno (1903–1969) was one of the principal figures associated with the Frankfurt School and the founding of Critical Theory; he wrote extensively on culture, society, the Enlightenment, modernity, aesthetics, literature, philosophy, and—more than any other subject—music. Of all major twentieth-century social theorists none is identified with music more than Adorno, and of all music analysts Adorno is the most widely influential in other fields. To this day, he remains the single most influential contributor to the development of qualitative musical sociology, just as he is by far the most important writer on musical aesthetics—as well as aesthetics generally—in the past century. His nuanced and distinctly interdisciplinary and intertextual readings of musical works, commonly provocative and often controversial, remain both fresh and insightful, all of which gives Adorno broad claim to his increasing force in music studies.

This volume makes available for the first time a general collection in English of Adorno's essays on music that surveys the breadth of his work, and at the same time provides detailed background commentary. The twenty-seven Adorno essays included here—some short, others long—are divided into four major sections, preceded by a general introduction.

The introduction provides a biographical sketch and background to the intellectual tradition within which Adorno's thought developed. Critical Theory and dialectics in particular are highlighted in an account of Adorno's overriding concern with the social and cultural impact of late modernity on the subject. Adorno's paradoxical position on political praxis and the social role of the intellectual is considered, as well as his position—closely related—on history and human suffering. The introduction incorporates consideration of Adorno's famously difficult writing.

Late Style in Beethoven

The maturity of the late works of significant artists does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are, for the most part, not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth. The usual view explains this with the argument that they are products of an uninhibited subjectivity, or, better yet, "personality," which breaks through the envelope of form to better express itself, transforming harmony into the dissonance of its suffering, and disdaining sensual charms with the sovereign self-assurance of the spirit liberated. In this way, late works are relegated to the outer reaches of art, in the vicinity of document. In fact, studies of the very late Beethoven seldom fail to make reference to biography and fate. It is as if, confronted with the dignity of human death, the theory of art were to divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favor of reality.

Only thus can one comprehend the fact that hardly a serious objection has ever been raised to the inadequacy of this view. The latter becomes evident as soon as one fixes one's attention not on the psychological origins, but on the work itself. For it is the formal law of the work that must be discovered, at least if one disdains to cross the line that separates art from document—in which case every notebook of Beethoven's would possess greater significance than the Quartet in C-sharp Minor. The formal law of late works, however, is, at the least, incapable of being subsumed under the concept of expression. From the very late Beethoven we have extremely "expressionless," distanced works; hence, in their conclusions, people have elected to point as much to new, polyphonically objective construction as to that unrestrainedly personal element. The work's ravaged

character does not always bespeak deathly resolve and demonic humor, but is often ultimately mysterious in a way that can be sensed in pieces that have a serene, almost idyllic tone. The incorporeal spirit does not shy away from dynamic markings like *cantabile e compiacevole* or *andante amabile*. In no case can the cliché "subjective" be applied flatly to his stance. For, in general, in Beethoven's music, subjectivity—in the full sense given to it by Kant—acts not so much by breaking through form, as rather, more fundamentally, by creating it. The *Appassionata* may stand here as one example for many: admittedly more compact, formally tighter, more "harmonious" than the last quartets, it is, in equal measure, also more subjective, more autonomous, more spontaneous. Yet by comparison the last works maintain the superiority of their mystery. Wherein does it lie?

The only way to arrive at a revision of the [dominant] view of late style would be by means of the technical analysis of the works under consideration. This would have to be oriented, first of all, toward a particularity that is studiously ignored by the popularly held view: the role of conventions. This is well known in the elderly Goethe, the elderly Stifter;¹ but it can be seen just as clearly in Beethoven, as the purported representative of a radically personal stance. This makes the question more acute. For the first commandment of every "subjectivist" methodology is to brook no conventions, and to recast those that are unavoidable in terms dictated by the expressive impulse. Thus it is precisely the middle Beethoven who, through the creation of latent middle voices, through his use of rhythm, tension, and other means, always drew the traditional accompanying figures into his subjective dynamics and transformed them according to his intention—if he did not indeed develop them himself, for example in the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, out of the thematic material, and thus free them from convention on the strength of their own uniqueness. Not so the late Beethoven. Everywhere in his formal language, even where it avails itself of such a singular syntax as in the last five piano sonatas, one finds formulas and phrases of convention scattered about. The works are full of decorative trill sequences, cadences, and *florituras*. Often convention appears in a form that is bald, undisguised, untransformed: the first theme of the Sonata op. 110 has an unabashedly primitive accompaniment in sixteenths that would scarcely have been tolerated in the middle style; the last of the Bagatelles contains introductory and concluding measures that resemble the distracted prelude to an operatic aria—and all of this mixed in among some of the flintiest strata of the polyphonic landscape, the most restrained stirrings of solitary lyricism. No critique of Beethoven, and perhaps of late styles altogether, could be adequate that

interpreted the fragments of convention as merely psychologically motivated, the result of indifference to appearances. For ultimately, the content of art always consists in mere appearance. The relationship of the conventions to the subjectivity itself must be seen as constituting the formal law from which the content of the late works emerges—at least to the extent that the latter are ultimately taken to signify more than touching relics.

This formal law is revealed precisely in the thought of death. If, in the face of death's reality, art's rights lose their force, then the former will certainly not be able to be absorbed directly into the work in the guise of its "subject." Death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art, and thus it has appeared in art only in a refracted mode, as allegory. The psychological interpretation misses this. By declaring mortal subjectivity to be the substance of the late work, it hopes to be able to perceive death in unbroken form in the work of art. This is the deceptive crown of its metaphysics. True, it recognizes the explosive force of subjectivity in the late work. But it looks for it in the opposite direction from that in which the work itself is striving; in the expression of subjectivity itself. But this subjectivity, as mortal, and in the name of death, disappears from the work of art into truth. The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art. Of the works themselves it leaves only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself. Touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being, are its final work. Hence the overabundance of material in *Faust II* and in the *Wanderjahre*,² hence the conventions that are no longer penetrated and mastered by subjectivity, but simply left to stand. With the breaking free of subjectivity, they splinter off. And as splinters, fallen away and abandoned, they themselves finally revert to expression; no longer, at this point, an expression of the solitary I, but of the mythical nature of the created being and its fall, whose steps the late works strike symbolically as if in the momentary pauses of their descent.

Thus in the very late Beethoven the conventions find expression as the naked representation of themselves. This is the function of the often-remarked-upon abbreviation of his style. It seeks not so much to free the musical language from mere phrases, as, rather, to free the mere phrase from the appearance of its subjective mastery. The mere phrase, unleashed

and set free from the dynamics of the piece, speaks for itself. But only for a moment, for subjectivity, escaping, passes through it and catches it in the harsh light of its intention; hence the *crescendi* and *diminuendi*, seemingly independent of the musical construction, that are often jarring in the very late Beethoven.

No longer does he gather the landscape, deserted now, and alienated, into an image. He lights it with rays from the fire that is ignited by subjectivity, which breaks out and throws itself against the walls of the work, true to the idea of its dynamism. His late work still remains process, but not as development; rather as a catching fire between the extremes, which no longer allow for any secure middle ground or harmony of spontaneity. Between extremes in the most precise technical sense: on the one hand the monophony, the *unisono* of the significant mere phrase; on the other the polyphony, which rises above it without mediation. It is subjectivity that forcibly brings the extremes together in the moment, fills the dense polyphony with its tensions, breaks it apart with the *unisono*, and disengages itself, leaving the naked tone behind; that sets the mere phrase as a monument to what has been, marking a subjectivity turned to stone. The caesuras, the sudden discontinuities that more than anything else characterize the very late Beethoven, are those moments of breaking away; the work is silent at the instant when it is left behind, and turns its emptiness outward. Not until then does the next fragment attach itself, transfixed by the spell of subjectivity breaking loose and conjoined for better or worse with whatever preceded it; for the mystery is between them, and it cannot be invoked otherwise than in the figure they create together. This sheds light on the nonsensical fact that the very late Beethoven is called both subjective and objective. Objective is the fractured landscape, subjective the light in which—alone—it glows into life. He does not bring about their harmonious synthesis. As the power of dissociation, he tears them apart in time, in order, perhaps, to preserve them for the eternal. In the history of art late works are the catastrophes.

(1937; GS, vol. 17, pp. 13–17)

Translated by Susan H. Gillespie

NOTES BY RICHARD LEPPERT

1. Adalbert Stifter (1805–1868), prolific Austrian short-story writer and novelist best known for his bildungsroman *Der Nachsommer* [1857; "Indian Summer"] and the epic historical novel, set in the twelfth century, *Witiko* (1865–67).

His writing is classically reserved and displays sensitivity to nature and life led simply. See Eric A. Blackall, *Adalbert Stifter: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948).

2. Both *Faust II* and *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* are late works. *Faust II* was published posthumously in 1832, the year of Goethe's death; Goethe began *Wanderjahre* in 1821 and completed it in 1829.

Alienated Masterpiece

The Missa Solemnis

Neutralization of culture—the words have the ring of a philosophical concept. They posit as a more or less general reflection that intellectual constructs have forfeited their intrinsic meanings because they have lost any possible relation to social praxis and have become that which aesthetics retrospectively claims they are—objects of pure observation, of mere contemplation. As such they ultimately lose even their own aesthetic import; their aesthetic truth content disappears along with their tension vis-à-vis reality. They become cultural goods, exhibited in a secular pantheon in which contradictions, works which would tend to destroy each other, find a deceptively peaceful realm of co-existence, e.g., Kant and Nietzsche, Bismarck and Marx, Clemens Brentano and Büchner.¹ This wax museum of great men finally admits its own disconsolateness in the innumerable ignored pictures of each museum and in the editions of the classics in miserly locked-up bookcases. But no matter how widespread the consciousness of all this has meantime become, it is still as difficult as ever to grasp this phenomenon in its entirety, at least if one ignores the fashion of biographical writing which reserves a niche for this queen and that microbe hunter. For there is no superfluous work of Rubens in which at least the cognoscenti would not admire the incarnate value and no house poet of the Cotta Firm² in whose work there are no non-contemporarily successful verses awaiting resurrection. Every now and then, however, it is possible to name a work in which the neutralization of culture has expressed itself most strikingly; a work, in fact, which in addition is also famous, which occupies an uncontested place in the repertoire even while it remains enigmatically incomprehensible; and one which, whatever else it may conceal, offers no justification for the admiration accorded it. No less a work than Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* belongs in this category. To speak seriously of this