

“TO BLAST AWAY THE THINGS THAT BLOCK MEN’S EARS”:  
ADORNO’S RELEVANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

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## Preface and acknowledgments

*“Ich bin nur ein Worte-Macher: Was liegt an Worten! Was liegt an mir!”*  
-Nietzsche

The impetus for this thesis lies in my own concerns as a composer-in-training: I had intransigent questions about what it meant to compose in today’s world—questions, needless to say, that aren’t addressed in music theory courses. How does history shape the music we make? How does the act of composition relate to society as a whole? What about the ethical dimension of music? In reading Adorno, I found an avenue toward insight that was exciting, intriguing, and at times exasperating. (A brief and fortunately mild spell of depression was my first reward for immersing myself in Adorno’s writings.)

Originally, I was perhaps beguiled by the fallacious idea of clarifying my compositional practice by means of critical investigation into the matters discussed here. I know now that it is ultimately impossible, for me at least, to solve questions of composition anywhere but within the act of composition itself. At the same time, this is not to exalt the immediacy of musical activity above the abstract ruminations of theory. It is rather to insist that theory and practice are as stubbornly irreconcilable as they are individually indispensable. No amount of thinking about the problems of composition, however they might be articulated, will lead to the illumination of the act. But nor is composition, nor indeed the entire body of activities that constitutes the domain of music in our society, thereby spared from the scrutiny of theory.

Why is this project necessary? In an age that celebrates plurality and scorns—rightfully—the stodgy and sanctimonious aspects of “high culture,” what concern ought we to have for modernism and its haughty exclusivity, other than promptly to bury it? First, it should be said that the association of modernist art and theory with a prudish, prickly asceticism, though not lacking in evidence, fails to do justice to aspects of modernism that endorse the sensual and the multifarious. (Adorno, for instance, writes that “Orgasm is a bodily prototype of aesthetic experience.”) But, truth be told, it is the imperious claim to an ethical dimension of artistic practice which constitutes for this writer the foremost allure of modernist aesthetics. Without an ethical aspect underlying artistic practice, the situation we face seems little different from that of Buridan’s ass, who, when faced with two perfectly equal bales of hay, starves to death for want of a good reason to choose one over the other.

Those to whom I owe thanks are too many to enumerate. In the interest of brevity, I’ll limit this to those who have been especially helpful during the exciting and often maddening process of writing this thesis. To everyone else (you know who you are) who has offered me their love, support, and friendship over the years, thank you. Without you I am nothing.

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ABSTRACT

Theodor Adorno can without exaggeration be called the intellectual avatar of musical modernism. As the foremost philosophical advocate of the Second Viennese School in the 1920’s and 30’s, Adorno’s writings were fundamental in articulating the aspirations and challenges of post-tonal music. In the 50’s and 60’s, he was a central figure at the Darmstadt summer courses, the crucible of the postwar musical avant-garde. Now that the lineage of musical modernism with which Adorno concerned himself can be put in historical perspective, we can begin to assess the significance of Adorno’s thought for contemporary music. In the first part of this thesis I present a synopsis of Adorno’s ideas on modern music, venturing, where necessary for purposes of explication, into his writings on aesthetics and modernity. The subsequent section is devoted to critiques of Adorno which seek to continue the spirit of his project while calling into question many of his basic assumptions. Finally, I look at the work of Brian Ferneyhough and Wolfgang Rihm, two contemporary composers working within a broadly defined modernist idiom. Through a consideration of their music and writings, as well as the reception of their work, I investigate the implications of their work for both the theoretical discourse of modernism and the horizons of contemporary musical practice.

## Introduction

The writings of Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) present a systematic and imposing theory of modern music and its relationship to society. It is no exaggeration to state that Adorno mounts a theodicy of modern music, an attempt to demonstrate how a seemingly aberrant cultural tendency is integrally related to the post-Enlightenment course of Western civilization. At the same time, Adorno wants to point out what is peculiar in modern music, to what extent it breaks with what has come before. As Richard Wolin states, “[Adorno’s thought] constitutes a monumental effort to vindicate modernism, to authenticate its ‘right to exist’ from a historico-philosophical point of view, however precarious that right might appear in contrast with the grandeur of classical works of art.”<sup>1</sup>

The characteristic mark of modern music, in Adorno’s view, is its radical autonomy, its distance from the practical concerns of human existence. This condition is for Adorno the curse of modern art; yet it is at the same time the precondition for the unique purpose that Adorno assigns to it, the “political vocation” at the heart of Adorno’s modernism.<sup>2</sup> For Adorno argues that the isolation of modern music from society is only superficial: he sees all art, even the abstract and hermetic manifestations of the avant-garde, as deeply related to the society that creates it. Though this relationship is obscure and problematic in modern times, art cannot help but be a manifestation of society, even when it attempts, under the banner of the “purely aesthetic,” to define itself in opposition to externally imposed standards. In Adorno’s understanding of the mediation of art and the social world, artworks speak most tellingly of society when they withdraw from it or seek to transcend it. He depicts the autonomous work as a “windowless monad,” a self-sufficient entity which can be grasped as such, without particular reference to the categories of everyday experience. But all such works are simultaneously artifacts of their society. Thus a technical and formal understanding of the work—on the level of abstraction required by the work’s autonomy claim—is a prerequisite to a holistic, social understanding:

In the last analysis art cannot be understood when its social essence has not been understood—and that goes also for the kind of art which withdraws completely from society.... Nobody can, for example, claim to be conversant with a Beethoven symphony unless he understands the so-called purely musical events in the music and at the same time hears in it the echo of the French Revolution. *How* these two moments of aesthetic experience are related is one of the intractable problems of a philosophical approach to art; the fact *that* they are related is incontrovertible.<sup>3</sup>

Adorno locates the nexus between music and society in a radically denaturalized notion of musical material. That is, Adorno conceives of the material of music not in terms of the harmonic series and other laws of acoustics, but rather as a product of social history, containing tensions and tendencies built into it by previous generations of artistic activity. A progressive imperative of sorts follows immediately from Adorno’s historical conception of musical material: because there are no timeless aesthetic values to which the artist can appeal, it is his duty to interrogate the material in order to determine the problems it presents and what compositional approaches might be fruitful for the present. Like all aspects of Adorno’s thought, the notion of progress is haunted by the recognition of its ambivalence. Adorno is wary of the faddish implications of the concept, its tendency to degrade to mere fashion and fetishization; what he has in mind is a critical historical awareness, a sensitivity to the latencies and possibilities of the material which alone can ensure the social relevancy of modern music.

Adorno's philosophy of modern art holds in tension two seemingly antagonistic aspects: on the one hand, there is the utopian faith in the humane potential of art to reveal the contingency of things and point toward their betterment. Adorno harbors the belief that autonomous art retains the unique possibility of shattering its fetters of isolation and forcing the "instant of awareness, where the subject realizes that the truth of an art work ought actually to be the truth about himself." The subject is "traumatized," and by virtue of the violent revelation imparted by the artwork, "is able to experience itself properly...[to wake] up to the narrowness of its own self-positing standpoint."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, this emancipatory effect—for Adorno the *raison d'être* of modern art—is ever more difficult to achieve, because the very substantiality of traditional aesthetic categories such as beauty, form and expression is called into question by modern art. For all the insight it offers, Adorno's is an almost unremittably bleak depiction of the possibilities for the legitimate continuation of art in modern society. The attenuated Adornian canon of "authentic" modern art—Schoenberg, Beckett, a few others—reflects the unduly exclusionary nature of his aesthetic.

In the decades following his death, a number of thinkers working in Adorno's wake have attempted to carry on and qualify his project in the name of a continuation of aesthetic modernism and to articulate why this project remains vital. Acknowledging a place for autonomous art in modern society, yet recoiling from Adorno's radical verdict, these thinkers endeavor to define a notion of autonomy that avoids the cul-de-sac into which Adorno's thought seems to lead.

Peter Bürger takes issue with Adorno's notion of the "advanced material" from which modern music was to take its cue. Arguing that developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century art have made possible the "simultaneity of the radically disparate," Bürger calls into question the idea that there is a single stock of material from which aesthetic criteria can be derived. This assertion suggests a new conception of modernism itself, one less phobic of tradition and convention, but maintaining a decidedly critical stance with regard to the historically sedimented fund of gestures and forms. The notion of autonomy is to be preserved, but Bürger argues that it needn't be so stringently defined. Eschewing Adorno's desperate evocation of the "lonely, exposed producer of art,"<sup>5</sup> Bürger argues for an understanding of autonomy as "that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable."<sup>6</sup> Bürger also calls into question Adorno's aesthetic objectivism, his tendency to willfully neglect the question of how our cognition of artworks is channeled by what Bürger calls "the institution of art." Pierre Bourdieu's writings are helpful in this connection, arguing as they do for a theorization of the "production of belief," the sociological factors that help to determine the relationship of artworks to human consciousness, whether general or philosophical.

Jürgen Habermas, too, presumes the value of autonomous art in late modernity, but seeks ways of bringing aesthetic rationality into play with the mundane world from which it has been sequestered. Habermas conceptualizes the separation of art from day-to-day existence in terms of "system" and "lifeworld." Whereas it is generally acknowledged that the specialization of knowledge in such domains as science or law is ultimately for the good of society, the same process in art is decried as a retreat to the "ivory tower." Defending the notion of an aesthetic rationality on par with that operative in the social and natural sciences, Habermas argues that the problem is not specialization in art, but the lack of subsequent mediation between the advanced techniques of contemporary art and the consciousness of the general public. Rather than simply accepting the isolation of art or attempting to annul its autonomy status, Habermas points toward a "changed constellation" of art and society, which would enable the products of aesthetic

rationality to escape their confinement and enter into dialogue with the lifeworld. Two experimental music movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fluxus and the Scratch Orchestra, are then considered in relation to Bürger's and Habermas's critiques of Adorno, leading to an argument for the continuing value of autonomous art.

The third part of the thesis turns to the work of two contemporary composers, Brian Ferneyhough and Wolfgang Rihm. Both of these composers can be placed within the dynamic of aesthetic modernism, but both also necessitate a reevaluation of the meaning of modernism in contemporary culture. Not only do both of these composers openly acknowledge the influence of Adorno's thought on their music, but each articulates in his music what could be seen as a qualified Adornian modernism: Ferneyhough writes forbiddingly complex music, yet distances himself from the compositional strictness and exclusionary rhetoric often associated with such high modernist composers as Pierre Boulez; Rihm employs traditionally resonant gestures alongside his own distinctive and unmistakably modern style, thus engaging a musical past that modernist composers have tended to disown.

Ferneyhough's music raises the question, voiced by Adorno in his essay "Vers une musique informelle," of when to say "thus far and no further." Ferneyhough deliberately tests the boundaries of musical performance and comprehension, aiming for a state of "too-muchness" in which the music verges continually on noise and disorder. His music is thus susceptible to the critique of being both unperformable and incomprehensible, a self-serving exercise of authorial narcissism. Arguably, however, it is precisely the *impossibility* of this music which imbues it with its peculiar force of expression. The performer is faced with the task of realizing a set of notational directions that consistently challenges (and at times defies) his physical and intellectual limits; and yet he must attempt, though predestined to fail. The true event of the music takes place in the unbridgeable chasm between performer and score. Likewise, the audience of this music is faced with an overwhelming multiplicity of perceptual strands, bringing the listener to the brink of sensory overload.

This compositional high-wire act has a specific purpose: Ferneyhough, in the tradition of modernist transcendentalism, seeks to elicit hitherto unlooked-for experiences from the crucible of seeming impossibility created by his music. Ferneyhough's radical constructivism—evoked in his writing by images of filters, sieves, and grids—resonates with Adorno's insistence that modern music employ the "state of the art" in aesthetic rationality. Yet Ferneyhough seems to have moved beyond the impasse of postwar serialism diagnosed by Adorno, in which the rationalization of music is accompanied by a sort of compositional entropy, leading to the gray, one-dimensional quality toward which postwar serialism was inclined.

The music of Wolfgang Rihm represents a break with postwar modernism in two primary aspects. First, Rihm has explored possibilities of engagement with traditional musical gestures to an extent unmatched by any major composer of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas postwar modernism tended to start *tabula rasa*, thus striving toward the transcendence of history, Rihm deliberately evokes symbols of the musical past, drawing them into the flux of his highly unstable musical discourse. Importantly, this turn toward the past encompasses only the local level of the music; Rihm can by no means be labeled a neoclassicist. Nor do the historical fragments that appear in his music serve to ground the listener in a safe and familiar emotive state; Rihm tends to frame referential material in such a way as to immediately signal its ambivalence, and thereby to suggest implicitly its own critique.

The second respect in which Rihm's music represents a significant departure from established modernist practice is what could be called his radical subjectivity. Rihm places a

premium on compositional freedom and independence from systems that would limit the free reign of his imagination. On one level, this is a profoundly anti-modernist gesture, in that modernism in music has largely defined itself by its systematic and highly rationalized approach to composition. But a wholesale identification of modernism with the pseudo-scientific quest for logic and objectivity is mistaken; it was this aspect of modernism that Adorno attacked in the name of a vanquished subjective presence which alone could raise music above the empirical realm of mere objects. At the same time, Adorno thought that genuine freedom in composition was not opposed to rationality, and he was wary of subjectivity being attained at the cost of articulacy. Rihm's music addresses these concerns head-on, sometimes seeming deliberately to highlight the dialectical link between freedom and chaos.

## Chapter one: The gospel according to Theodor

In many ways, Adorno's conception of modernism confirms all of our worst suspicions. Its inscrutability, its complexity, its dissonance, its hostility, and its resistance to closure all find sanction in Adorno's aesthetics. It is likely not going too far to say that Adorno is the foremost philosophical advocate for those characteristics of modern art that have made it an ever-present *bête noire* in 20<sup>th</sup> century indictments of cultural decay. Adorno's dark vision of the role of modern art stems directly from his historical pessimism: as were so many German intellectuals who watched from abroad the destruction of the European continent, Adorno was certainly traumatized by the experience of the two World Wars, but his pedigree of pessimism can also be traced to the resentment, common in the Germany of the Weimar Republic in which Adorno reached manhood, of "Americanism," a happy-go-lucky embrace of modernity and capitalism which seemed to threaten the Continental humanist tradition.<sup>7</sup> Moving to America in the 1940's, Adorno was little heartened by the conditions he found there. He developed a theory of the "culture industry" to explain how art under late capitalism becomes a mass-produced means of escape from the horrors of the "rationalized world," in which individuality and spontaneity are subordinated to the unrelenting demands of production. But unlike many conservative cultural critics of the time, with whom he is often unjustly associated, Adorno indicted the present not in the name of a lost golden age, but of a possible, as yet unattained future. As Richard Leppert explains,

Adorno saw modernity as a period of more or less permanent crisis as regards the deeply ironic relation between, on the one hand, the general possibility for human happiness and emancipation as a result of the highest ideals of the Enlightenment and the technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution, and, on the other, the actual general failure to realize either....For Adorno, modernity and catastrophe were one, the bitter irony of which resided in the fact that modernity at its beginning had posited something fundamentally different, which might have been realized but was not.<sup>8</sup>

Adorno was both the foremost philosophical advocate of modernism in music and its fiercest critic. He was strongly associated with two of the major scenes of 20<sup>th</sup> century musical modernism: first, from the late 1920's until his emigration from Germany in 1934, Adorno was a marginal member of the so-called "Second Viennese School" of Arnold Schoenberg and his pupils Alban Berg and Anton Webern, writing profusely on the music of these composers and studying composition for a time with Berg. His contact with these composers was to leave an indelible imprint on his thought, defining for him the essential problems of modern music.<sup>9</sup> The composers of the Second Viennese School achieved notoriety for having broken definitively with the system of "common practice" tonality which had reigned in Europe since about 1700. Refuting the idea that dissonances must resolve to consonances (a notion that had been attacked already in the music of Wagner and others) and that all the notes of a piece must relate ultimately to a single (if shifting) tonal center, Schoenberg announced the "emancipation of the dissonance," the newfound freedom for dissonances to stand alone, shedding their auxiliary status. In the 1920's, the "free atonality" of the first two decades of the century gave way to a more codified means of composition without tonality, which Schoenberg termed "composition with twelve tones which are related only with one another." This approach, based on the formulation of a precompositional ordering of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, which are then permuted to form the motivic material of the piece, was Schoenberg's most influential contribution to the development of modern music.

In the early 1950's, Adorno was a regular at the Darmstadt Summer Courses, the crucible of the postwar avant-garde, frequented by such composers as Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio, Ligeti, and Nono. These composers were fixated on the implications of the music of Webern, in whose music the formal implications of twelve-tone compositions were pushed to their furthest extremes. Webern was interested in using the twelve-tone row to ensure the greatest possible degree of consistency in his compositions; his music is highly rationalized, its formal cohesiveness being achieved at the cost of the conventionally "musical" aspects of lyricism and developmental interest that were the foremost concerns of Schoenberg and Berg. The composers of the postwar avant-garde saw in Webern the inspiration for the almost scientific dissection of music into individually-manipulable "parameters": Boulez, for example, in his *Structures* for piano, takes the twelve values of the pitch row and applies them to rhythm, dynamics, and articulations. Thus these parameters are essentially predetermined, each in isolation from the others. Pieces such as this are examples of "integral serialism," the *reductio ad absurdum* of compositional rationalization, the results of which—as has been repeatedly noted—are all but indistinguishable from those of contemporary works composed using chance procedures. Though the limitations of this approach were quickly recognized, music of the postwar avant-garde remained devoted to the ideal of structural monogenesis and guided by a "general will to construct on the basis of demonstrable principles."<sup>10</sup>

In his involvement with both of these movements, Adorno was as much of a gadfly as an advocate: Schoenberg was apparently put off by Adorno's criticisms, and Adorno's later attacks on the postwar avant-garde were seen as rearguard actions of a thinker who was trapped in outmoded aesthetic categories. As much as he maintained a degree of distance from the musical movements with which he was involved, refusing to align exclusively with a single party or compositional school, Adorno was nonetheless a fierce partisan of the *concept* of modern music, which he labored all his life to define. Fundamental to this concept was the notion of autonomy, the tendency for artists to formulate and assert aesthetic and technical demands over and against the expectations of society. It was with the Second Viennese School that the break between modern music and its erstwhile public—a schism now engrained in musical life, as evidenced by today's concert programming—was decisively made. Shortly after the end of the First World War, Schoenberg founded the *Verein für Musikalische Privataufführungen* (Society for the Private Performance of Music) in response to the consistently negative reception of the atonal music of Schoenberg and company. The society was devoted to performances of modern music ("from Mahler and Strauss to the newest"), admitting only a select audience (minus critics) and frequently performing pieces twice, so that they would be better understood.<sup>11</sup> This is a remarkable moment in the history of modern music, when the compositional demands for autonomy, which throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century had existed in an uneasy alliance with the institutional frame of the bourgeois concert hall, finally sundered that bond and spawned an institution suited to its needs. As Adorno writes, "The production of art, its material, the demands and tasks that confront the artist when he works, have become divorced in principal from consumption, i.e., from the presumptions, claims, and possibilities of comprehension that the reader, viewer, or listener brings to the work of art."<sup>12</sup> It was this state of affairs—the apparent withdrawal of modern music from society—that was the focal point of Adorno's thought. In the face of the apparent irrelevance of autonomous music in modernity, Adorno mounts an argument for the enduring, if problematic, significance of a music which seemingly stands aloof from society.

*Theory of material*

Adorno's notion of "material" underlying the development of music is fundamental to his understanding of modern music and its relation to society. The theory of material has two important consequences in the larger scope of his thought. First, it asserts the existence of "inherent tendencies" in the state of compositional technique, tendencies which taken as a whole constitute an objective set of demands upon composers working at any given stage of history. Second, it allows him to relate music history concretely to social history while still honoring the "autonomy principle" of art in the bourgeois era—that is, the notion that the sufficient understanding of these works requires the apprehension of their inward-pointing, centripetal tendencies.

What does Adorno mean when he speaks of "inherent tendency of the musical material"?<sup>13</sup> Speaking broadly, Adorno describes material as "the stuff the artist controls and manipulates...all that the artist is confronted by, all that he must make a decision about."<sup>14</sup> The material, then, is what is apart from the artist, what is "already there" in the world. At the same time, however, Adorno insists that it is not to be understood as "raw" or historically invariable; instead, he points toward a historically-oriented understanding of the musical substance from which composers create their works. In order to understand the significance of this orientation, it is helpful to consider by contrast the conventional, "naturalist" conception of musical material.

Paul Hindemith, a composer and theorist who was a contemporary of Adorno's, can be taken as a representative of this perspective. His influential two-volume work *The Craft of Musical Composition* is a self-proclaimed effort to establish a "new and firm foundation" for music, setting forth the "basic principles of composition, derived from the natural characteristics of tones, and consequently valid for all periods."<sup>15</sup> Hindemith is impelled to this endeavor by the chaotic state of music in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

In no other field of artistic activity has a period of overdevelopment of the materials and of their application been followed by such confusion as reigns in this one. We are constantly brought face to face with this confusion by a manner of writing which puts tones together according to no system except that dictated by pure whim, or that into which facile and misleading fingers draw the writer as they glide over the keys.<sup>16</sup>

If composers are to find a way out of this dilemma, Hindemith argues, they require "precise knowledge of the tones and the forces that reside in them."<sup>17</sup> These forces Hindemith derives from the "bases for [the composer's] work provided by nature"—from the acoustic phenomenon of the harmonic series. He argues that the appearance of the major triad in the first six partials of the harmonic series establishes the fundamental dependence of music on this combination of tones, "one of the most impressive phenomena of nature, simple and elemental as rain, snow, and wind." The major triad is set forth as the irreducible foundation of music:

Music, as long as it exists, will always take its departure from the major triad and return to it. The musician cannot escape it any more than the painter his primary colors, or the architect his three dimensions. In composition, the triad of its direct extension can never be avoided for more than a short time without completely confusing the listener. [...] In the world of tones, the triad corresponds to the force of gravity.<sup>18</sup>

Adorno takes issue with this definition of musical material and its assumption of timeless natural laws of musical construction. In Adorno's view, the dynamics of musical form have as little to do with acoustics as do the structures of grammar with the basic phonemes. As Max Paddison writes, "[For Adorno] it is not a question of 'sound' as discussed by physics, as a

natural material, but rather a case of music as the ‘metaphysics’ of sound. That is to say, in music ‘sound’ is more than simply ‘what it is’.”<sup>19</sup> Adorno proposes a notion of material whose constraints derive not from natural laws, but from historically embedded tendencies:

The assumption of an historical tendency in musical material contradicts the traditional conception of the material of music. This material is traditionally defined—in terms of physics, or possibly in terms of the psychology of sound—as the sum of all sounds at the disposal of the composer. The actual compositional material, however, is as different from this sum as is language from its total supply of sounds. It is not simply a matter of the increase and decrease of this supply in the course of history. All its specific characteristics are indications of the historical process.<sup>20</sup>

The comparison of the material of music with that of language is apposite here. The “language-character” of music is an important recurring theme in Adorno’s writings: Adorno sees music as existing in a peculiar symbiosis with language, deriving its meaning both from resemblance and from difference: “Music without any signification, the mere phenomenological coherence of tones, would resemble an acoustic kaleidoscope. As absolute signification, on the other hand, it would cease to be music and pass, falsely, into language.”<sup>21</sup> The analogy between music and language is helpful in understanding the repercussions of Adorno’s theory of musical material, for his argument is that musical “language,” no less than its verbal counterpart, is subject to an evolutionary process in the course of which linguistic elements are discarded, having become insufficient or somehow dated. This musical detritus—Adorno mentions, for instance, the fully-diminished seventh chord—is fundamentally at odds with the constructive demands of modern music :

All the tonal combinations employed in the past by no means stand indiscriminately at the disposal of the composer today. [...] It is not simply that these sounds are antiquated and untimely, but that they are false. They no longer fulfill their function. The most progressive level of technical procedures designs tasks before which the traditional sounds reveal themselves as impotent clichés.<sup>22</sup>

For Adorno, as for Hindemith, the material serves to restrict the otherwise unbounded freedom of the artist, constraining her movement in definite but subtle ways.<sup>23</sup> There is a profound difference, however, between a natural and a historical conception of material. Hindemith’s search for immutable principles is anathema to Adorno, for whom the historical development of compositional technique is a macrocosmic image of the experiential unfolding of music in time. As Susan Buck-Morss suggests, what Adorno writes about the temporal impulse in music could be extrapolated to apply as well to his view of the history of musical material: “Music is, as temporal art, bound by its very medium to the form of succession, and therewith as irreversible as time. Once it commences, it is obliged to go further, to become something new, to develop itself.”<sup>24</sup> Nature, as the eternally-the-same, could thus be seen as fundamentally inimical to music, which exists only in a state of becoming. This is perhaps what Adorno had in mind when he called music “the enemy of fate.”<sup>25</sup>

But for all its emphasis on freedom and autonomy, is Adorno’s historical conception of material no less susceptible to charges of determinism than the “naturalist” stance that he debunks? That is, doesn’t the idea of “inherent tendency of musical material” threaten to turn composers into pawns in the unfolding of history? Theories that lay stress on the supposed objective conditions of history are always at risk of succumbing to a heavy-handed determinism, thereby exchanging the fetishization of freedom—the notion that “all the tonal combinations employed in the past stand indiscriminately at the disposal of the composer today”—for the

equally false valorization of a supposedly inexorable historical process.<sup>26</sup> Aware of this danger, Adorno took care to avoid positing the tendency of the material as an absolute or metaphysical principle, looming above human activity in the manner of the Hegelian *Weltgeist*. Susan Buck-Morss explains:

When Adorno spoke of musical material's "historical dialectic," he was not referring to a transcendent principle of its development, but simply to the dialectical process of compositional innovation as it developed in empirical history. As Schönberg had noted, art developed through artworks, and, Adorno would have added, these in turn were the product of dialectic praxis, the artist's ability to elicit the new out of the potentialities of the present material.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, two seemingly contradictory implications follow from Adorno's conception of material. On the one hand, as mentioned above, the material acts as a constraint upon the composer, an external force with which she must grapple. The Romantic image of the act of composition as a purely subjective effusion is replaced by an understanding of the composer as a laborer or technician, working within a particular set of constraints and problems. Because "what can be done in art and what formal approaches are promising is determined immediately by the stage of social development," the composer is bound by the technical and expressive means available in a given time and place:<sup>28</sup>

The picture of the composer is transformed. He loses that freedom on a grand scale which idealistic aesthetics is accustomed to grant to the artist. He is no longer a creator. It is not that the times and society impose external restrictions upon him; it is rather the rigid demand for compositional accuracy made upon him by his structure which limits him. The state of technique appears as a problem in every measure which he dares to conceive: with every measure technique as a whole demands of him that he do it justice and that he give the single correct answer permitted by technique at any given moment. The compositions themselves are nothing but such answers.... His efforts find fulfillment in the execution of that which his music objectively demands of him. But such obedience demands of the composer all possible disobedience, independence, and spontaneity. This is the dialectical nature revealed in the unfolding of the musical material.<sup>29</sup>

The last two sentences of this passage indicate the second implication—one of freedom. If it follows from the existence of the material that the composer's choices are historically conditioned, the composer is nonetheless afforded a great degree of freedom, in the sense that the compositional imperatives of the material are unique to each period of history; nothing is a priori "against the rules." Adorno's dialectical conception of artistic creation centers on the collision and interplay of subjective and objective forces. Thus, the historical dialectic of musical material by no means amounts to the absolution of the meaningful subjective agency of the composer; instead, it provides the historical frame within which composers' actions take on concrete meaning. The material is to be understood as "second nature," the sediment of previous subjectivity that comes to confront a later stage of history as an objective, natural force: "The 'material' is itself a crystallization of the creative impulse, an element socially predetermined through the consciousness of man. As previous subjectivity—now forgetful of itself—such an objectified impulse has its own kinetic laws."<sup>30</sup> The expressive impulse of the composer is not enough; subjectivity must be embodied, given a definite and perceptible shape. The act of composition thus takes place in the "force-field" between the composer's creative impulse and the historically embedded constraints of the material. This is the fundamental aesthetic principle that Adorno derives from Hegel's conception of art as the "sensuous semblance [*das sinnliche Scheinen*] of the idea."<sup>31</sup> It is also at the root of Adorno's effort to understand the social significance of modern music.

*Art and society*

In addition to providing the basis for the critical evaluation of individual works (a point we'll take up later, in considering Adorno's understanding of progress in art), the concept of musical material allows Adorno to locate the social significance of art *within* the autonomous work, rather than in the moment of reception, to which the modernist work becomes indifferent. The concept of the material provides the bridge between two seemingly irreconcilable impulses in Adorno's aesthetics: on the one hand, to account for art within a forthrightly materialist conception of human society, and on the other, to preserve the autonomy of artworks in the bourgeois era, to honor, for the sake of interpretation, their claim to be self-sufficient, whole, and independent from external conditions.

Adorno's attempt to formulate this unorthodox model of the social mediation of art begins to make sense only once it is distinguished from two opposing notions which Adorno regarded as equally false alternatives. On the one hand, Adorno was an intransigent foe of the *l'art pour l'art* notion according to which art belonged to an idealized realm of beauty, blithely removed from the physical world. Against this, Adorno stressed the historical nature of aesthetic concepts and the status of art as a mode of intellectual labor. At the same time, he harbored the utmost contempt for Marxist doctrines that demanded that art serve an immediate social function, and that saw all autonomous art, and especially the abstract forms associated with modernism, as decadent, and antisocial.<sup>32</sup> The aesthete glorifies art's alienation from society; the Marxist deplors it. Both share the assumption that the turn away from traditional forms in the arts that took place around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the questioning of representation in the visual arts, narration in literature, and tonality in music—represents a genuine break of art from society.

To some extent, Adorno endorses this interpretation. Modern music, he argues, is essentially different from what came before, and this should not be whitewashed in the name of an overly relativistic “history of ideas” that overlooks the historical ruptures underlying the emergence of modernism.<sup>33</sup> For Adorno, it is foolish to see the new music as simply “ahead of its time,” a body of “modern masterworks” with which the canon has not yet caught up. It must be seen as a fundamentally different type from that which has come before, appealing to incommensurable criteria. But nor can these criteria be defined in strictly formal-aesthetic terms, so that the modern music could be summed up as the “negation of tradition”. As Adorno sees it, modern music, insofar as it “unflinchingly follows its own impulse,” has the unique capability to embody the anxiety and terror of an age, cultural elements which may be denied other avenues of expression. Art finds its supreme end when it gives voice to this negativity, unflinchingly and humanely.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, Adorno sees the modernist “moment” not as an actual break between music and society, but as a radical reconfiguration of their relationship. Adorno cleaved to what Carl Dahlhaus has called the “totality postulate” of Marxist theory, “that a history of music (or any other superstructural phenomenon) written in isolation from history in general is meaninglessly abstract.”<sup>35</sup> Music is a part of human society and registers disruptions in that society. Truly autonomous music is an idealist chimera, a mind without a body. But autonomy, as a historical tendency in which the aesthetic domain is defined in opposition to empirical reality, is an historical fact.

Art's essence is twofold: on the one hand, it dissociates itself from empirical reality and from the functional complex that is society; and on the other, it belongs to that reality and to that social complex. This comes out directly in the particular aesthetic phenomena which are always simultaneously aesthetic and *faits sociaux*.

Aesthetic autonomy and art *qua* social fact are not the same; moreover, each calls for a different kind of perception.<sup>36</sup>

For Adorno, modern art is a cipher of the society to which it belongs, and the more it makes the doomed attempt to sever itself from the social world, the more acutely it reflects back on it. The concept of the material guarantees that art, no matter how “antisocial” its apparent content, remains yoked to the society against which it revolts: it entails that artistic production, on whatever level of abstraction or complexity, requires engagement with the material, which is simultaneously engagement with society, insofar as material is a product of society. Because Adorno understands the material with which the artist works as being defined not by natural parameters, but by its historical development, in engaging this material the artist is in fact engaging society in proxy.<sup>37</sup>

### *Progress and critique*

If an understanding of musical material based on eternal laws of acoustics can be used to delegitimize controversial new musical movements, and thus serve, in Adorno’s acerbic phrase, as “a superstructure for reactionary compositional tendencies,” a historical notion of material has precisely the opposite tendency. In this view, what is “natural” is not a timeless set of principles, but a progressive, developmental impulse driving the state of material through the course of history.

To speak of progress at all, let alone in an aesthetic sense, is to step into a conceptual quagmire. The notion of progress is bound up with the experience of modernity, which is characterized by a pointed consciousness of temporal distance.<sup>38</sup> To the extent that belief in progress is tied to the modernist impulse in the arts, it has fallen out of favor with the eclipse of modernism as a cultural movement. But even before the late-20<sup>th</sup>-century backlash against modernism, progress in art was a highly problematic concept. There is strong evidence for a correlation between the preservationist notion of culture developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the simultaneous sociological processes—primarily the Industrial Revolution and the specialization of labor—which threatened to usher in a new and alien social order. Art and culture, reconceived as timeless, almost sacred domains of “sweetness and light” (Matthew Arnold) become correctives to the radical change taking place in the physical world; thus the notion of progress in the arts, first announced by Baudelaire in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, takes on an antagonistic tone of resentment against the museum-like atmosphere to which bourgeois society had consigned art.

In addition to conflicting with art’s socially mandated role of cultural preservation in the midst of wholesale modernization, the notion of progress in art is problematic on a more basic level. Progress in the domain of the natural sciences can be reasonably defined according to a standard of explanatory sufficiency and concision: phenomena are to be described and predicted in an ever more adequate and elegant manner. Likewise, social progress, though a much more knotty issue than scientific progress, has been formulated in innumerable different ways: the difficulty lies less in imagining what progress might look like than in devising the means by which it might be attained. In art it is another matter. Ends such as adequate explanation or the elimination of inequality are lacking. The inevitable counter to the question of progress in art is the query, progress to where? The notion of progress in art would seem to come to grief on the basic disjunction between art and the means-ends rationality that alone can endow progress with definite meaning.

Adorno sees art as a peculiarly opaque reflection of the society that creates it. Thus the notion of progress in art cannot be grappled with apart from progress on a societal level. Adorno points out an inverse relationship obtaining between progress in art and in society: the emphatic sense of progress, of a moral imperative underlying the development of art, corresponds precisely with the abandonment of these values in the political sphere—according to Adorno’s Marxist-oriented reading of modern European history, the consolidation of bourgeois society in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century is the point at which the progressive social vision of the Enlightenment is at last relinquished, and the universalist aspirations of the bourgeois class begin to wither away. Thus art serves to compensate for the failure of progress in the social world by taking up the notion of progress in the domain of art.

Artistic polarization occurs in the absence of socio-political polarization. Where organization would make good sense—in planning material life and human interaction in society—we see too much private control and anarchy at work, and too little organization. Art, on the other hand, has enough leeway to develop models of planning the likes of which would not be tolerated in the domain of social relations of production.<sup>39</sup>

Genuine progress in art would constitute a critique of the backwardness of society. For Adorno, this is precisely the legitimate function of progressive modern art: “The reason why there is still art and progress in art is that there has been no progress in the real world. *Il faut continuer.*”<sup>40</sup> But this is a doomed project, and not only because of the fundamental incongruence between art and the means-ends rationality that progress presupposes: even if progress in art were possible in a non-problematic sense, it would still be the semblance of progress, because autonomous art in bourgeois society is relegated to the realm of “appearance” (*Schein*) and is thus consigned to an impotent commentary on real life.

Adorno acknowledges that the notion of progress can be applied to art only with great difficulty, but argues that a progressive ideal must be maintained at all costs. The alternative to progress in art is not timelessness but irrelevance. For if the material of art is drawn from society itself, the truthful reflection of society in the artwork cannot take place unless the artist engages this material at its most recent stage of development:

Modernity answers to Rimbaud’s postulate that, in relation to its own time, art be the most advanced consciousness where sophisticated technical procedures and equally sophisticated subjective experiences interpenetrate. Rooted in society, these procedures and experiences are critical in orientation. Such truly modern art has to own up to advanced industrial society rather than simply deal with it from an extraneous standpoint. [...] The experience of objective conditions being inescapable, any work of art that pretends to be able to extricate itself from them is doomed to insignificance.<sup>41</sup>

This is the cornerstone of Adorno’s normative aesthetics: that the social relevance of artworks is dependent upon their being shaped from the “cutting edge” of artistic technique. The paradox is that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, advanced technique runs athwart the experiential domain of everyday life: the aesthetic becomes redefined not as a type of idealization or beautification of empirical reality, but as a reality *sui generis* that is radically removed from the everyday world. Thus the avant-garde becomes the target of now-familiar criticisms of ivory-tower insularity, whereas Adorno argues that it is precisely the disconnectedness of modern art that is true to the state of modern society: “Using the term ‘abstract’ in its loosest sense for a moment, we can say that abstractness in art signals a withdrawal from the objective world at a time when nothing remains of that world save its *caput mortuum*. Modern art is as abstract as the real relations among men.”<sup>42</sup>

There still remains the issue of how progress in music is to be grasped concretely. If Adorno acknowledges that progress cannot apply to art as it does to other domains, what exactly does it mean to postulate progress in art? Adorno is quick to assert that his notion of progress is not intended to provide a scale with which individual works are measured according to their progressive qualifications.

With the notion of progress it is not claimed that one can compose better today, or through historical grace produce better works than in the time of Beethoven.... The locus of progress in art is furnished not by its individual works, but in its material. [...] Progress means nothing other than now and then to grasp the material at the most advanced stage of its historical dialectic.<sup>43</sup>

Thus progress for Adorno is not the pretext for a chronological hierarchy of artistic worth; this would contradict Adorno's historical perspective, according to which the "truth-content" works of art is inextricably bound to the course of history, such that works from different historical periods are essentially incommensurable.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, if Adorno were to speak of any overarching tendency in the development of art, it would be toward disintegration and fragment.<sup>45</sup>

Progress, as Adorno conceives it, manifests not in individual works, which, strictly speaking, are incomparable, but in the development of the material. It is too indefinite a concept to provide a trans-historical narrative linking all of music history in one continuous development, but just precise enough to provide the impetus for a historically-oriented normative aesthetics. With the notion of progress, Adorno has in mind a protocol of technique that emerges dialectically out of artistic practice, establishing at each stage of history a normative baseline by which works can be judged. For Adorno, the technical standard to which art must be held accountable cannot be stated in the abstract. It is less a set of principles than a general *niveau* whose relevance must be shown in analysis of individual works: "It is no longer possible to 'learn' definitively what constitutes good or bad music. Whoever would pass judgment must face squarely the immutable questions and antagonisms of the individual compositional structure, about which no general music history can teach."<sup>46</sup>

That Adorno was anything but a dogmatic devotee of progress is demonstrated most forcefully in his writings on musical tendencies after the Second World War, most notably "The Aging of the New Music."<sup>47</sup> Here Adorno presents a broad attack on unnamed composers of the postwar avant-garde. His basic claim is that postwar composition submits to a brand of material fetishism, seeking to excise all traces of subjectivity by means of highly rationalized precompositional procedures. Succumbing to what Adorno calls "pseudomorphosis into science," composers falsely imagine that once contingency and choice are stripped away from the compositional process, a purely objective essence—a musical *Ding an sich*—will result. This mentality, embodied in its extreme poles by integral serialism and indeterminacy, provokes Adorno to turn against the avant-garde in the name of abandoned subjectivity:

Something purely irrational is hidden in the midst of rationalization, a confidence in the meaningfulness of abstract material, in which the subject fails to recognize that it, itself, releases the meaning from the material. The subject is blinded by the hope that those materials might lead it out of the exile of its own subjectivity.<sup>48</sup>

Art's claim to independence from the social world is false: society determines the substance of art through the social mediation of the material. Thus Adorno is quick to acknowledge the affinity between the cult of novelty in modern art and the fetish of the new that comes to characterize capitalist society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Being "up-to-date" is a necessary but not sufficient condition of Adorno's ideal of modern art: it must mirror the world without simply

parroting it, its level of technique merged with an “equally sophisticated subjective experience.” The faddish stigma of the avant-garde is the price it pays for social relevance: in order to keep the pace with society, it must obtain a level of technical acumen commensurate to its historical moment. “If it wants to avoid selling out, art has to resist fashion while simultaneously internalizing it so as to keep in touch with the external world which is its substance.”<sup>49</sup> It is precisely this point of contact between art and society that allows art to mount a critique of society. There is no opposition, contrary to popular belief, between an art that is “engaged” with the social world and one that is blissfully detached; it is rather a question of whether and to what extent art’s complicity with society is registered and critiqued within its formal structure. Artists must dirty their hands if they are to speak truth, and this is done, Adorno argues, not by taking up “social themes” or political causes as the subject matter of art, but by the endeavor to “find a form that accommodates the mess,” (Beckett) this latter being the abstract, “de-aestheticized” material of modern art, which in its deformity is a microcosm of the society with which it is contemporary. “Emphatically modern art does not flourish in Elysian fields far away from the commodity world but grows right in the midst of that world and the artist’s awareness of what that world is like.”<sup>50</sup>

### *Normative aesthetics*

The normative aspect of Adorno’s notion of progress functions *negatively*: the “demands of the material” are in essence taboos, serving to purge music of extraneous elements. This is at the heart of Adorno’s idea of the “canon of prohibitions” governing the evolution of modernism. “The concept of modernism is privative, indicating firmly that something ought to be negated and what it is that ought to be negated; modernism is not a positive slogan. [...] Previously, styles and artistic practices were negated by new styles and practices. Today, however, modernism negates tradition itself.”<sup>51</sup> The modernist program of negation acts on two levels: on the level of musical gesture, it forbids predictable, stereotyped passages and progressions; on the level of form, it demands that each work posit its own structure without recourse to preexisting models. The historical evolution of musical forms, in which one genre supplants another, gives way to the categorical critique of musical genre itself:

The new music suffers from the practiced and the all-too-familiar, from which it differs so profoundly. It impotently takes up arms against the way of the world; its posture is aggressive. In its desire to submit only to its internal law and to mutiny against the law of demand, its subject, its potential being, which is concealed even from itself, expresses itself in highly concrete form. Its qualities become manifest in what it prohibits.<sup>52</sup>

The taboo on convention leads inexorably to a crisis of form that Adorno refers to as “musical nominalism”: individual works are no longer conceived as instantiations of a certain genre or type, but rather as unique forms. This development was anticipated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when composers first bristled against the constraints of the “academic” genres of sonata and fugue, seeking to define each work not in relation to a pre-existing mold, but in terms of its own internal logic.<sup>53</sup> This impulse toward formal self-sufficiency is in turn fundamental to the emphatic concept of new music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Subotnick asserts,

“Contemporary music” cannot be considered a chronologically descriptive term, encompassing all newly created twentieth-century art music. It is a historically normative term, with aesthetic, intellectual, and even moral implications.... To be fully contemporary, a composition must be able to vouch for its own integrity as

a structure *sui generis*; it must discourage efforts to understand it as an example, no matter how excellent, of a preexisting kind.<sup>54</sup>

If this nominalistic streak represents an important continuity between romanticism and modernism, it is radicalized in the latter to such an extent that this link becomes obscured. Along with the turn away from tonality, the desire to create each work from the ground up, independently of the conventions of form, leads to a state of compositional vertigo which, for Adorno, was the fundamental crisis of modern music. Confronted with a complex and unruly material severed from the traditional syntax of tonality, the modern composer must forge a compelling musical form without recourse to the handed-down genres which, Adorno argues, are anyway inimical to the state of the material.

Composers find themselves faced by tasks which are as impossible as is the dilemma of a writer who is called upon to create a unique vocabulary and syntax for every sentence he writes. The triumph of subjectivity over heteronomous tradition—the freedom of allowing every musical moment to stand for itself without imputation—is achieved at a very high cost.<sup>55</sup>

The great and terrible irony of modern music (which is also in evidence in the development of Western society at large) is that in freeing itself, it has paralyzed itself. Having cast off the officious demands of social functionality as well as the handed-down conventions of form, music finds itself in an existential crisis of sorts—a syndrome that is mirrored variously in all the arts. As Subotnick explains, “In exposing to doubt the necessity of its own internal structure the contemporary composition has also opened to question the need for itself and for its category altogether.”<sup>56</sup> Adorno should be credited for his unparalleled treatment of this problem, but the limitations of his thought should not be overlooked. For all his emphasis on attention to particulars and his contempt for the cavalier impositions of theory, Adorno tends to absolutize the notions of autonomy and advanced material in his conception of modernism. Adorno steadfastly asserts the social significance of modern art, but simultaneously consigns all else to the cultural dustbin, setting up an implied dichotomy of art versus culture industry which undoes the sophisticated, dialectical treatment of these matters that Adorno labored so persistently to explain. What’s more, his summary dismissals of “moderate modernism” often suggest a fetishization of the new which is at odds with Adorno’s own advocacy of such “nostalgic” composers as Mahler and Berg. Adorno’s modernism, in short, becomes a caricature of its own impossible ideals; recoiling from the inhospitality of the present, he essentially defers the possibility of an authentic continuation of art to a utopian future.

In order to come to grips with the problematic nature of modern art (and, more generally, that of art in modernity), we must move beyond Adorno. For all his insight, Adorno’s perspective is anchored in the historical milieu of modernization and World War. Though we always have much to learn from history, Schoenberg’s problems are not ours. Only through a critique of Adorno can we establish an aesthetic framework that recognizes—and transcends—the shortcomings of his thought.

## Chapter Two: Implications of autonomy

In this chapter we turn to two thinkers who have taken issue with Adorno from an ultimately revisionist standpoint. Peter Bürger, a German aesthetician and literary theorist, attempts to highlight the necessity for a critique of Adorno based on the impact of what Bürger terms the “historical avant-garde.” Bürger focuses on two aspects of Adorno’s thought: first, Bürger calls into question Adorno’s theory of the “most advanced material,” the basis of Adorno’s normative aesthetics. Second, Bürger addresses Adorno’s obsession with art objects and his consequent contempt for “reception aesthetics”: Bürger argues that “the autonomy doctrine is the horizon within which [Adorno] think[s],” and that his aesthetic theory was consequently limited.<sup>57</sup> Jürgen Habermas, who studied under Adorno at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in the late 1950’s, likewise engages Adorno’s writings in order to re-evaluate the significance of the autonomy concept in the cultural dynamic of late modernity. Habermas is concerned primarily with the effects of the specialization of labor in modern times, focusing in particular on theorizing the means by which highly rationalized spheres of activity (including art) can be brought into a more vital, dialogical relationship with the everyday social world. Both of these thinkers are concerned with probing the contemporary relevance of Adorno’s conception of modernism and assessing the importance of autonomous art in contemporary society.

Following a consideration of these two writers, we look at Fluxus and the Scratch Orchestra, two experimental music movements from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that represent radical rejections of Adorno’s notion of aesthetic autonomy. Both of these movements are musical manifestations of the attempt to reintegrate art and life, which are seen to be artificially estranged from each other; thus both are relevant to Bürger’s and Habermas’s discussions of the negation of autonomy. Though these movements sought to undo the separation of art from everyday life, they ultimately served to illustrate how this distance contributes to the unique role of art in modernity and why it is of enduring importance. Finally, we assess the implications of these historical developments for a continuation of the modernist project that is both indebted in spirit to Adorno’s work and critical of the inadequacies of his thought for the problems of the present.

### *Peter Bürger: the historical avant-garde and the institution of art*

Bürger attempts to make a distinction between modernism and the avant-garde according to aesthetic and sociological criteria. As Bürger sees it, the “historical avant-garde”—represented by such early 20<sup>th</sup>-century movements as Dada and Surrealism—marks the dawning of the “self-criticism” of art.<sup>58</sup> Unlike previous artistic movements, which sought to negate particular forms or styles, the avant-garde called into question the place of art in relation to society as a whole. Broadly speaking, these movements wanted to blur (if not dismantle) the boundary between art and life, to rebel against the quasi-religious aura of sanctity and separation that had become associated with art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But the integration of art with life sought after by the avant-garde was not to be effected on the level of content—by making the subject-matter of art more “accessible,” for example—but by somehow reuniting art with life praxis. The avant-garde wanted to maintain the aesthetic freedom associated with the autonomy status of art in modern society, but sought also to negate the isolation and social irrelevance that were the cost of that freedom. The mission of the avant-garde was not the capitulation of art to the “means-ends

rationality of the bourgeois everyday,” from which autonomy in the first place provided an escape, but the injection of a *uniquely aesthetic rationality* into “real life.”<sup>59</sup>

Though he ultimately argues that the avant-garde movements failed in their mission of integrating art and praxis, Bürger asserts that the implications of their work are nonetheless significant. By juxtaposing seemingly incongruous material within the frame of a single work, the historical avant-garde made possible the realization of choice among varying “artistic means,” each of which had hitherto been operative as an unconscious “period style.”<sup>60</sup> Bürger writes, “Through the avant-garde movements, the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed in to a simultaneity of the radically disparate. The consequence is that no movement in the arts today can legitimately claim to be historically more advanced *as art* than any other.”<sup>61</sup> The consequence of this insight is a new orientation for aesthetics, in which “the normative examination is replaced by a functional analysis, the object of whose investigation would be the social effect (function) of a work, which is the result of a coming together of stimuli inside the work and a sociologically definable public within an already existing institutional frame.”<sup>62</sup>

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes,

The subjectivist approach to art simply fails to understand that subjective experience of art in itself is meaningless, and that in order to grasp the importance of art one has to zero in on the artistic object rather than on the fun of the art lover.<sup>63</sup>

Adorno stresses endlessly the “social force-fields” at work between the artist and his creation, the fact that artworks are not vessels of pure subjectivity but rather the product of a collision between subjective and objective factors. The shortcoming of Adorno’s model is that he fails to acknowledge the analogous effect of social mediation on the other side of the equation. When we consider artworks—whether as laymen or as philosophers—our path to the “thing itself” is always channeled through socially determined modes of understanding. Practically, this means that recognition of these channelization effects is crucial to a sociologically informed aesthetics, a notion that Adorno seemed to deny.

In an effort to conceptualize this aspect of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, which Adorno himself seems deliberately to have neglected, Bürger introduces the idea of the “institution of art,” which denotes the “productive and distributive apparatus and also [the] ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works.”<sup>64</sup> Lacking an understanding of how the institution of art conditions the reception of artworks, Adorno fails to recognize that the significance of autonomous art cannot be ascribed to the artworks alone, and that the institutional matrix within which art is propagated has as much to do with the received meaning of art as do the artworks themselves.<sup>65</sup> Again, Bürger argues that it is the provocations of the avant-garde that revealed the mechanics of the institution of art. Duchamp’s “ready-mades,” for example, were at one point mere objects. Only when they were transfigured by their placement in an exhibition did they become artworks. And the only way that one can deny that objects such as the ready-mades are in fact “art,” and thereby refute Bürger’s assertion of the function of the institution of art, is by falling back on an a priori (and essentially dogmatic) definition of “what art is,” according to which some works simply fall short. Adorno, though, would be the last to endorse such a notion.<sup>66</sup> Thus it seems that Adorno would have to consent to the idea that the difference from reality that characterizes artworks has a social factor, beyond that embodied in the creative act on which he focuses.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu theorizes this social factor in terms of the “field of cultural production,” which he defines as the objective set of relations which comprise the realm of cultural production, including artists, critics, merchants, and a wide range of “consecratory” institutions, unique to each medium, who act as “gatekeepers”—arbiters, ultimately, of what constitutes “art.” This idea of the field as the object of sociological inquiry, rather than the individual artist or monadic artwork, is fundamental to Bourdieu’s approach, which emphasizes the social contingency of the existence of art: “The work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art.”<sup>67</sup>

<b>ADORNO</b> (subjective)	<b>Artist</b> (objective)	<b>→ Material</b> (objective)	<b>→ Artwork</b> (objective)	<b>← Institution of art</b> (objective)	<b>← Observer</b> (subjective)	<b>BÜRGER/BOURDIEU</b>
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In light of the roles of extensive networks of educational, distributional, and consecratory institutions participating in the sustenance of art as a social concern, Adorno’s model seems anemically one-sided. His distrust of an overly positivistic, reception-centered approach to the sociology of culture is motivated by the concern that such a methodology would essentially preclude speculative or critical thought, becoming instead little more than reportage.<sup>68</sup> Though this defense of the role of theory remains pertinent, the wealth of Adorno’s insight into the social and philosophical ramifications of artistic production is offset by the poverty of his theorization of reception, which, as Bourdieu points out, is better understood as itself a type of production: “The sociology of art and literature has to take as its object not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e., the production of the value of the work, or, which amounts to the same thing, of belief in the value of the work.”<sup>69</sup>

### *Jürgen Habermas: system and lifeworld*

Habermas, like Bürger, seeks to contextualize Adorno’s thought in a larger sociological frame. Whereas Adorno focused on tracing the development of modern art in terms of artworks and their formal structures, Habermas is more concerned with understanding the governing social dynamic of modern society that could help to explain modernism from a different angle.

Rather than being a historical aberration, Habermas argues that the development embodied in aesthetic modernism, in which art is increasingly removed from the domain of shared, everyday experience, is in fact endemic of the societal tendency of the post-Enlightenment West. The alienated state of modern art is for Habermas a manifestation of the fundamental problematic of modern Western society: the deleterious effects arising from the specialization of knowledge. Habermas conceives of the relation between specialized knowledge and everyday life in terms of “system” and “lifeworld,” respectively. In this model, for each of the three domains of human experience—objective, subjective, and intersubjective—there develops a field of specialized knowledge, in which a particular type of rationality is worked out, corresponding to the nature of the experience in question. Thus science is the domain of specialized thought devoted to the mission of knowing and controlling the natural world; law, for example, is a parallel domain in the social world; and art is a special type of rationality concerned with the subjective aspect of experience:

An art that has become autonomous pushes toward an ever purer expression of the basic aesthetic experiences of a subjectivity that is decentered and removed from the spatiotemporal structures of everyday life.

Subjectivity frees itself here from the conventions of daily perception and of purposive activity, from the imperatives of work and what is merely useful.<sup>70</sup>

Habermas' model of the tripartite division of system and lifeworld is rendered below.

<b>System</b>		<b>Lifeworld</b>
Cognitive-instrumental	(technology, natural sciences)	Objective reality
Moral-practical	(politics, social sciences)	Social action
Aesthetic-expressive	(art, culture)	Subjective experience

Tracing this schema back to the Enlightenment, Habermas points out that these different spheres of knowledge were originally conceived holistically; their separation did not indicate incommensurability, but rather stemmed from the recognition of the unique forms of logic at work in each domain.

The project of modernity formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life—that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life.<sup>71</sup>

Thus the Enlightenment project was twofold: it encompassed the systematic exploration of each of the domains of knowledge *and* the subsequent enrichment of the lifeworld on the basis of its discoveries. But, Habermas argues, over the course of time, specialization proceeds to such a degree that not only do intellectuals in different fields lose connection with each other's work, but also the sense of belonging to or concern with the non-specialized domain of the lifeworld is attenuated. Grimly put, intellectuals become just as ignorant of the world outside of their work as do factory laborers. With regard to the natural and social sciences, this is generally not perceived as a crisis: we are content to leave the concerns of engineering and economics to the specialists devoted to those fields, with the vague belief that the best interests of society are being served. In art and the humanities, however, it is a different matter. The specialization of knowledge in these fields is more often perceived as something unnatural or threatening. As Adorno notes, "While people resign themselves to the unintelligibility of theorems of modern physics, trusting that they are rational just the same, they tend to brand the unintelligibility of modern art as some schizoid whim."<sup>72</sup> Taking his cue from Adorno, Habermas asserts the validity of the development of an autonomous aesthetic rationality. It is the second aspect of the Enlightenment project—the utilization of this rationality for enrichment of the lifeworld—to which Habermas directs his attention:

[With the development of the specialization of knowledge] the distance grows between the culture of the experts and that of the larger public. What accrues to culture through specialized treatment and reflection does not immediately and necessarily become the property of everyday praxis. With cultural rationalization of this sort, the threat increases that the life-world, whose traditional substance has already been devalued, will become more and more impoverished.<sup>73</sup>

Adorno acknowledges that modernist art, in pursuing the course of specialization, risks consigning itself to a "bad guildsmanship" which only gives credence to the philistine complaints against a hostile, ivory-tower modernism. But nor can art, having recognized itself as

a practice set off from society, undo this isolation by means of capitulation to the demands of society—for Adorno, this would amount to nothing less than regression to an inauthentic mode of existence. Adorno lays the blame at the feet of modernity itself: “The tension between guild-like, encapsulated art, on the one hand, and, on the other, the true *Gebrauchskunst* that acquires its ease of understanding only by renouncing the rational through-construction of its production process—this tension cannot be resolved within art; it is established by the [social] relations within which we exist.”<sup>74</sup> Since artists cannot bring about a reconfiguration of art’s relationship with society, Adorno argues that the only honorable course of action is for artists to resign themselves to the hermetic critique of society enacted through their state of radical autonomy. On the basis of his staunchly heterodox Marxism, Adorno upholds the unique value of aesthetic experience against attempts to reduce art to a factor of economic or social domination; but as a result of his conviction of the abject powerlessness of the superstructure, Adorno is forced to advocate a potentially quietistic position of withdrawal. To be sure, Adorno acknowledges that the price of autonomy may be the grim fate of art “living a harmless life in its appointed niche,” but he nonetheless fails to grapple seriously with the notion that autonomy itself can lose its critical force in an “anything goes” society.<sup>75</sup> When all spheres of culture are forcibly yoked to a totalitarian project, autonomous art may in fact harbor a “polemical a priori” in its stubborn resistance to functionalization. But this is not necessarily the case in post-industrial late capitalism. Under these conditions, autonomous art may actually play into the hands of the dominant interests, with their ideology of a spiritual world proudly aloof from material reality.<sup>76</sup>

Habermas fundamentally takes issue with Adorno’s diagnosis, arguing that Adorno’s fixation on autonomy ultimately amounts to an irresponsible “strategy of hibernation.”<sup>77</sup> For Habermas the continuation of the project of modernity inherits the task of discovering means of engaging the domains of specialized knowledge with the everyday praxis from which they have become estranged. What is needed is the “differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism.”<sup>78</sup> Habermas wants artists to discover means of engaging the lifeworld of non-specialized consciousness without sacrificing the technical fruits of aesthetic autonomy or the critical independence of artistic practice from dominant social forces. Thus Habermas’s position is opposed not only to Adorno’s radical defense of autonomy, which allows for no possibility under current social conditions for a non-alienated relationship between modern art and society, but also to the avant-garde attacks on autonomy in the name of the supposed unity of art and life.

### *Experimental music and the negation of autonomy*

We turn now to consider two musical movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that can be described in Bürger’s terms as “neo-avant-garde”: these movements share the goal of the historical avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century of undermining the autonomy status of art and bringing about a changed relationship of art to life praxis. The purpose here is twofold: first, to understand how alternatives to autonomy have been conceived and realized in 20<sup>th</sup> century music; second, to highlight why such movements ultimately suggest the enduring relevance of Adorno’s thought.

It is important to note that the movements of Bürger’s historical avant-garde—Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism—were not primarily *musical* movements. Thus the experimental music tradition of the second half of the century, though certainly indebted to the historical avant-garde, should not be seen as derivative or second-generation; rather it reflects a curiously delayed

reception in music of the avant-garde impulse that originated much earlier in literature and the visual arts.

A terminological note is also in order: the term “avant-garde” is used here (as it is by Bürger) to denote particular movements that have in common the desire to work outside the established institutional structure of the art world. Confusion arises because “avant-garde” is also used more generally to refer to broadly modernist or anti-traditional tendencies: Michael Nyman, for instance, distinguishes between the avant-garde (composers such as Boulez and Stockhausen) and experimental music (John Cage and company). Thus “avant-garde” could refer to *modernist* composers who critique the language of art, or to *experimental* composers who focus rather on the social frame within which music takes place. This distinction is sometimes a fluid one, but for the most part the sense of the term “avant-garde” should be given by the context.

In the late 60’s and early 70’s, the British composer Cornelius Cardew led a group called the Scratch Orchestra, devoted to the goals of collective composition and social action and motivated by a dissatisfaction with the institutional state of music. Significantly, this phase of Cardew’s career follows work in a more text-based modernist idiom (his work with Stockhausen and his magnum opus *Treatise*) and precedes his uninhibited embrace of accessibility and forthrightly political music in the late 70’s. Thus within Cardew’s development as a composer, the Scratch Orchestra period clearly lies between an early engagement with autonomous art—though Cardew was politically conscious from an early time—and a later turn toward a “committed” art equally at odds with the avant-garde mission of unifying art and life.

The Draft Constitution of the Scratch Orchestra defined the group as “a large number of enthusiasts pooling their resources (not primarily material resources) and assembling for action (music-making, performance, and edification).”<sup>79</sup> The presentation of the group as “enthusiasts” is certainly significant: Cardew came to resent strongly the ideology of the professional musician, which he saw as fostering a narrow, insular class definition which prevented musicians from perceiving the broader parameters of the class struggle. But do the “grassroots” aspirations of the Scratch Orchestra point toward a fruitful interface of expert culture with the experience of non-specialists, or do they merely confirm Adorno’s suspicion that such efforts inevitably fail to achieve anything of either aesthetic or social worth? Rod Eley, in his history of the Scratch Orchestra, bitterly recounts how the group produced a *Toy Symphony* for a performance at a club frequented by young proletarian immigrants, highlighting the group’s inability to respond to the political needs of the moment, instead creating “a typical Scratch atavism, return to childhood.” “We experienced at last the true nature of our almost total incompetence, and the total irrelevance of the Scratch Orchestra in the present form of the modern world.”<sup>80</sup> Events such as this, signaling a “pathological disunity between theory and practice,” led to the realignment of the Orchestra along more explicitly political lines. Eley writes:

Despite the pious intentions of members to make contact with people, they were unable to carry them out in practice. Many different approaches were tried, but in a haphazard manner. Since there was no scientific base, no theory, no means of judging practice, they remained at the level of gimmicks, and certainly did not represent proper research into the problem of audience.<sup>81</sup>

The new format of the Orchestra featured an “Ideology Group” whose charge it was to integrate the practice of the group into a program of revolutionary Communism, “to evolve music and music-making which would serve the working and oppressed people of England.”<sup>82</sup> Thus Cardew’s later turn to political music was prefigured in this phase of the Scratch

Orchestra's development. The group disbanded a few years after this realignment. Clearly then, if the earlier, pre-politicized stage of the Orchestra can be said to adumbrate Habermas' idea of mediation, in which the musically uneducated are engaged by expert culture without either group being dissolved, Cardew and the other leaders of the group were nonetheless dissatisfied with the results. The brief and stormy existence of the Orchestra, too, attests to the difficulty of balancing the aesthetic concerns of specialized musicians with the mission of social or political involvement. Ultimately, those in the group less interested with the explicitly political ramification of their music were dismissed as "bourgeois idealists," and the consequent direction of the Orchestra, as well as Cardew's individual work, led to the production of squarely traditionalist music, whose claim to a political effect, moreover, is hard to take seriously. Thus if we can appreciate the effort at mediation embodied in the Scratch Orchestra, we must still admit that the fate of the Orchestra argues for the continued relevance of Adorno's warnings: art that relinquishes autonomy in the name of "engagement" risks discrediting itself both aesthetically and politically. What Habermas intends by mediation, in any case, is likely less the entwining of art and politics than the unleashing of the potentially emancipatory effects of aesthetic experience through the interplay of this experience with that of the lifeworld. Habermas, like Adorno, holds on to the irreducible value of the aesthetic, whereas Cardew would likely give up the ghost of "profane illumination" through art as a lingering phantom of bourgeois ideology.

The Fluxus movement, encompassing multiple artistic media, geographically diffuse, and surprisingly durable, offers a powerful contrast to the Scratch Orchestra as a model of organized experimental music practice. Though sharing with the Orchestra a contempt for the musical establishment in both its traditional and modernist forms, Fluxus artists tend to frame their opposition in less political terms. Whereas for Cardew and the Scratch Orchestra, commercial art and autonomous art were two sides of the same coin, Fluxus opposed commercialism in art, and its attendant ideology of individual genius, with a curiously attenuated notion of *l'art pour l'art*: "Fluxus is concerned with works and ideas, with a minimum of personality. It is done for the love of it—'for its own sake'. If value comes to be attached to this—great! But it is uncommercial by its very nature."<sup>83</sup> "Works and ideas," however, should not be interpreted in purely or even primarily aesthetic terms. Better put, Fluxus artists were interested in framing mundane events aesthetically and vice versa. Through this process of framing, the audience is to be brought to a state of realization in a process that Dick Higgins, drawing from hermeneutic theory, refers to as a "fusion of horizons":

The performer performs the work. He or she establishes a horizon of experience—what is done, its implications and whatever style the performer uses are all aspects of this horizon. The viewer has his or her own horizon of experience. He or she watches the performance, and the horizons are matched up together. To some extent there is a fusion of these horizons. When the horizons fuse, wholly or in part, they are bent, warped, displaced, altered. The performance ends, and the horizons are no longer actively fused. The viewer examines his or her horizon. It is changed, for the better or for the worse. The best piece is the one that permanently affects the recipient's horizon, and the worst is the piece which the recipient, acting in good faith, cannot accept at all.<sup>84</sup>

The amenability of this conception to Habermas's concerns is obvious. The idea of mediation, indeed, implies the merging of the horizons of specialized artists and laypeople. But this is one of the few aspects of Fluxus that seem to jibe with Habermas's remarks on contemporary art. Fundamental to Habermas' notion of mediation is the conviction that the "crisis of modern art" is not to be resolved by the dissolution of art as a distinct sphere of human rationality, as avant-

garde movements such as Dada and Surrealism sought to effect. Instead, what is needed is a “changed constellation of art and the lifeworld”<sup>85</sup>—a nebulous program, to be sure, but one that underlines Habermas’ commitment to what might be called revisionist modernism: the societal dynamic of modernity represented by the radical specialization of knowledge and the consequent “impoverishment of the lifeworld” is to be neither glorified nor negated, but channeled, redirected toward the “rational organization of everyday social life.” Instead of maintaining a productive dissonance, Fluxus artists championed the wholesale integration of art and life. “The *unity of art and life* is central to Fluxism. When Fluxus was established, the conscious goal was to erase the boundaries between art and life.... Today, it is clear that the radical contribution Fluxus made to art was to suggest that there is no boundary to be erased.”<sup>86</sup>

Such statements seem to imply that the desirability of the erasure of the boundary between art and life can be taken for granted. But it does not necessarily follow from the realization of the “artificial” nature of artistic institutions that such institutions are utterly without legitimacy. A more effective critique of the institution of art would have to be grounded in a thorough critique the notion of aesthetic autonomy—both as an institutional state of affairs and as a conceptual model—and its formidable bases in the social structures of modernity. From this would stem a dialectical view of aesthetic autonomy which would acknowledge its limitations and its merits from the standpoint of an explicit social theory. For now, Bürger’s critiques of the historical avant-garde apply equally to their latter-day successors. In drawing near to praxis, the avant-garde risks losing the perspective which alone can inform a critical stance toward society. As Bürger writes, “The (relative) freedom of art vis-à-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance.”<sup>87</sup> In its attempt to fuse its alternative rationality with the dominant rationality of bourgeois society, the avant-garde risks collapsing “that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable.”<sup>88</sup>

Habermas, like Bürger, is skeptical:

The aesthetic experience revealed by the Avant-Gardes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century failed to gain access to a unilaterally rationalized everyday practice, no matter how hard they tried. Desublimated art does not interfere in a transformative, liberating way in the ways of life reified by capitalism, deformed and distorted by consumerism and bureaucracy, but rather, it stimulates those tendencies.<sup>89</sup>

Habermas cites two major factors in the failure of the avant-garde project. First, there is the assumption that once art is brought out of the museum and concert hall, “real life” will suddenly be rendered aesthetic. But if the institution of art constricts the possibilities of art, it also underwrites the very existence of aesthetic experience. Manifestations of art that take place in shopping malls or on crowded street corners are just as likely to become mundane as they are to render the mundane aesthetic. Ironically, then, the avant-garde is no less guilty than the aesthete of a naïve belief in the power of art itself, apart from the institutional framing that alone gives it what power it may have. The “happenings” of the avant-garde serve only to disperse the contents of the aesthetic sphere, whereas the goal ought to have been to deliver them from their frozen, hermetic state into new forms more amenable to interplay with the lifeworld.

Second, Habermas argues that the integration of art and life—were it even attainable—is ultimately ineffectual without the simultaneous mediation of the other spheres of specialized knowledge; failing this, the “liberation” of art in fact annuls what little cultural power it still harbors. As Habermas writes,

In everyday communication, cognitive meanings, moral expectations, subjective expressions and evaluations must relate to one another. Communication processes need a cultural tradition covering all spheres—cognitive, moral-practical, and expressive. A rationalized everyday life, therefore, could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment through breaking open a single cultural sphere—art—and so providing access to just one of the specialized knowledge complexes.... A reified everyday praxis can be cured only by creating unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive elements. Reification cannot be overcome by forcing just one of these highly stylized cultural spheres to open up and become more accessible.<sup>90</sup>

A realization of the shortcomings of the avant-garde by no means amounts to a dismissal of its achievements, or a writing-off of similar avenues of action in the future. It is merely to point to the sociological naïveté exhibited in the supposition that the autonomy status of art, as it functions both subjectively (how we think about art) and objectively (how activities and objects we call “art” are propagated in society), could be undone by fiat—an ingenuousness (or quixotism) which is not at all atypical among artistic movements. Nor would these critiques of the avant-garde have been possible had their attempts not been made: theory is, as ever, attendant on practice. As Habermas writes, “[The experiments of the avant-garde] have served to bring back to life, and to illuminate all the more glaringly, exactly those structures of art which they were meant to dissolve.... The radical attempt to negate art has ended up ironically by giving due exactly to [those] categories through which Enlightenment aesthetics had circumscribed its object domain.”<sup>91</sup> This is the positive lesson of the avant- and neo-avant-garde movements: in mounting a radical attack on autonomous art, they allowed for the autonomy concept to be put in critical perspective; at the same time, they illuminated the factors that make the concept durable and vital.

### *Toward a post-autonomous Adornian aesthetic*

Instead of propagating a break with modernism under the banner of postmodernism, I count on its dialectical continuity. That means that aesthetic modernism must also recognize as its own much that it has until now rejected. That is, no more tabooing of tonality, representation, and traditional literary forms; but at the same time distrust of this material and of the appearance of substantiality which emanates from it.... The dialectics of form and expression must be executed as something irreducibly particular, whereby the latter no longer means individual situation but social experience refracted through the subject.<sup>92</sup>

Though Adorno’s theory of material highlights the social significance of autonomous art, his blindness to the mediation of works by what Bürger called the “institution of art” led him to overemphasize the critical force of autonomy. The proud defiance of autonomous art too easily bleeds over into what Herbert Marcuse called “affirmative culture,” in which art is made into a preserve for the humane values which are incompatible with the modern social order.<sup>93</sup> Aesthetic autonomy, as Adorno defined it, is no more historically stable in its significance than any of the traditional aesthetic categories. As Dahlhaus writes, “It is a matter of debate whether the hermetic nature of modern art, its abstraction from familiar emotional content and retreat to problems of form and material, is to be construed as constituting disagreement with or adaptation to the existing state of affairs.”<sup>94</sup> The recalcitrance of autonomous art, its “polemical a priori,” is critical only at a certain phase of artistic and social development; it would be the task of a post-autonomous Adornian aesthetics to come to grips with the meaning of autonomy for the present, and from this to theorize the “dialectical continuation” called for by Bürger. Again, a critique of Adorno in this regard must pay tribute to his nuanced treatment of these issues, especially in his

later writings. He himself reminds us that if aesthetic autonomy was in its historical origins the manifestation of a critical impulse, at the same time “art’s distance from...society also betrays an attitude of non-intervention.”<sup>95</sup>

As for Adorno’s notion of “advanced material,” it is likewise a question of retaining what is valuable in the concept while casting off its dead weight. If we acknowledge, with Bürger, that the notion of a single advanced material is now untenable, the question is how we can forge the criteria for the criticism of artworks on a material basis. In rejecting the idea of a single, monolithic “material” to which all artists in a given field are accountable, we should not thereby throw out the concept altogether, falling back on an ahistorical, neutral notion of material such as Hindemith’s. What should be salvaged from Adorno is the notion of material as a social category, as the entry point for a critique which addresses simultaneously the structure of the work and its (implicit) ideological content. To employ historical models or materials in composition is not necessarily indicative of reactionary tendencies, but nor does the composer who thus engages tradition somehow sidestep the confrontation with history embodied in the act of composition. If all material is historical, all music represents a particular presentation of this history and a stance with regard to it: there is no way of avoiding this dynamic, no default to a neutral position. But of course, the relationship between musical and ideological structures is as certain in the abstract as it is problematic in each individual work. As Bürger argues,

Whether the recourse to past formal schemata merely reproduces them or they are made into a convincing means of expression for a current expressive need cannot be decided by theory, but only by meticulous, detailed analysis of individual works. Adorno’s magnificent one-sidedness consists in having demanded the decision of theory.<sup>96</sup>

As we have seen, the progressive impulse Adorno imputed to modernist art is predicated on his theory of the material. Thus a critique of Adorno’s concept of advanced material necessitates a reevaluation of the notion of progress. Though Bürger defends a notion of aesthetic rationality that is essentially Adornian, arguing that “art should by no means become the refuge of the irrational within a rationalized world,” he also maintains that irrationalism and “the longing for regression” should no longer be disowned as inimical to modernism.<sup>97</sup> Dahlhaus, too, questions whether Adorno’s “idea that there is a standard of musical awareness or of progress below which a composer must not fall if he does not wish to produce irrelevancies” assumes a continuity in the material which is at odds with the ruptures of history.<sup>98</sup> Dahlhaus’s melancholy conclusion is that if we cannot be sure of what constitutes progress in art, we can at least have no doubt about regression.<sup>99</sup>

Having argued for the contemporary relevance of Adorno’s thought—albeit in modified form—we now proceed to consider how Adorno’s legacy is represented in today’s music. The work of two contemporary composers, Brian Ferneyhough and Wolfgang Rihm, illustrates some of the compositional implications of the contemporary modernist aesthetic outlined in this chapter. But the music of these composers—and the cultural discourse surrounding that music—will in turn shape the theorization of this aesthetic in important and unpredictable ways.

### Chapter three: Two case studies in contemporary composition

Though Adorno's iconoclastic vision of modernism has elicited a number of spirited responses from writers similarly concerned with the relation of modern art and society, the question remains whether Adorno's ideas have gained traction among artists themselves. This question is all the more imperative given the forbidding message of Adorno's philosophy, which, with its brooding insinuations of "the end of art," seems as likely to ice artistic activity as to inspire it. Why on earth would composers today want to read Adorno, except out of masochism? Indeed, the fact that Adorno has enjoyed such an enduring influence in spite of the bleak tenor of his writings is a testament to how persuasively he states his admittedly difficult case.

Of course, as the previous chapter demonstrates, one needn't buy completely into Adorno's apocalyptic worldview to find insight in his thought. Both Brian Ferneyhough (b. 1943) and Wolfgang Rihm (b. 1953) acknowledge their indebtedness to Adorno in their writings and, in different ways, betray Adorno's influence in their music. But more importantly, the work of both composers also calls for a reevaluation of Adorno's categories, even beyond that provided in the theoretical writings of Bürger, Habermas, and others. Thus the purpose in this chapter is not simply to see how these composers match up against the parameters of Adorno's modernism, but rather to gauge the extent to which that theory of modernism (and its modified forms) succeeds or fails in making sense of the most recent compositional developments.

This treatment of Ferneyhough and Rihm is of necessity focused primarily on textual sources, rather than analysis of scores. Though it is hoped that the writing is informed by the author's encounter with these composers' music, we are here concerned (*pace* Adorno) less with "the music itself" than with the way these composers (and those who have written about them) articulate the issues confronted in contemporary composition. The integration of score-based analysis with such broader considerations of the cultural dynamics of the music in question remains a worthwhile and formidable task.

What is at issue here is how Adorno's ideas about modern music have influenced composers working within a broadly defined modernist idiom. This influence, of course, can take many different shapes, given the multivalent nature of Adorno's thought. Though we are considering in this chapter only two composers out of the vast panorama of contemporary art music, this pair represents nicely something of the span of Adorno's influence and the radically divergent manifestations it can take on. In many ways, Ferneyhough and Rihm address opposite poles of Adorno's thought, and yet each has been able to articulate a unique version of musical modernism that both does justice to Adorno and makes valuable contributions to the continuing project of modern music.

#### *Brian Ferneyhough*

What is music 'about'? Possibly, about the relationship pertaining between the realm of the senses and the ordered object of their perception seen as an extended metaphor of possible forms of life. The idea of a work acting out the conditions for possible worlds of order which are not immediately subjected to external cost/efficiency categorization seems a reasonable point of departure... A truly 'experimental' music is not necessarily one that juggles half-digested ideas and materials in order to be surprised at what comes out: rather, it is a form of living discourse, which, at every moment, offers many possible paths towards its own future.<sup>100</sup>

Ferneyhough's music immediately commands attention, both visually and aurally. His scores have an instantly foreboding look: a provocative, Byzantine mass of dynamic markings,

ever-changing articulations, and nested tuplets of irrational rhythms. Because of its difficulty, the performance of his music is the exclusive domain of a small number of highly specialized performers, most of whom are devoted to performances of contemporary music. Ferneyhough's musings on his compositional methods are rife with imagery of filters, grids, and sieves, and the constructivist orientation indicated by these metaphors is readily audible in his music.

The most arresting aspect of Ferneyhough's music is its almost overwhelming complexity. Indeed, Ferneyhough has become the most visible figure in what could be called a complexity movement, stemming primarily from Great Britain in the 1980's. This tendency has aroused a general academic interest in defining the notion of complexity in music.<sup>101</sup> Intuitively, complexity is thought of as a multiplicity of elements within a common perceptual field. But complexity cannot be merely an additive phenomenon, for an overabundance of elements results in the sensation not of complexity, but of chaos: beyond a certain threshold, many distinct phenomena become lumped together in an indifferent perceptual mass. Likewise, the sensation of complexity can come about in a context containing relatively few "moving parts": in musical terms, a Bach invention consisting of two interweaving melodies could arguably be much more complex than a symphonic movement involving many more instrumental parts. This is because complexity has to do less with the number of objects than with their relations. As Richard Toop writes, "The word 'complexity' evokes a situation in which there are not necessarily 'many things' (there could be many, but there might be only a few), yet in which I sense many levels of relationships between the few or many things."<sup>102</sup>

The notion of complexity, in one form or another, is fundamental to the development of musical modernism. Toop goes so far as to posit a fundamental "complexity drive" at work in Western music.<sup>103</sup> The progressive increase in complexity is most obviously apparent in the gradual introduction into compositional practice of the twelve pitches of the equal-tempered scale: the more pitches available, the greater the number of potential harmonic and contrapuntal relations between them. But the tendency toward increasing complexity in 20<sup>th</sup> century music is neither perfectly linear nor continuous, but rather takes the shape of a dialectical oscillation between freedom and restraint. Schoenberg's "emancipation of the dissonance" was followed by the imposition of the 12-tone row; the purging of motivic elements in Boulez's music was effected only through the radical measures of integral serialism. In short, the more possibilities have opened up, the more composers have employed radical, systematic means to control and limit them.<sup>104</sup>

Ferneyhough's compositional priorities will become clear only once his music has been situated within the historical context of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ferneyhough belongs to the generation that came of age amidst the serial exploits in the 1950's and 60's of such composers as Boulez, Stockhausen, Babbitt, and Nono. Though Ferneyhough's music falls squarely within the modernist line extending from the Second Viennese School to postwar serialism, his basic compositional orientation in many ways represents a divergence from those of his predecessors: as Jonathan Harvey writes, "[Ferneyhough] apparently absorbed the discoveries of total serialism to a profounder degree than almost anyone else of his generation, without actually subscribing to its orthodoxies in his music."<sup>105</sup> These "orthodoxies"—which were soon forsworn by most of the composers involved with their formulation—were insightfully diagnosed in Györgi Ligeti's 1958 essay "Metamorphoses of Musical Form."<sup>106</sup> Ligeti notes that the systematic control of each parameter of musical sound sought by integral serialism results in a "flattening-out" and loss of differentiation on the level of form. With all factors of the composition subject to "the tender mercies of serial distribution," contrast on a

larger scale becomes difficult to effect; the products of total serialism, Ligeti points out (in what is now a commonplace) become indistinguishable from those of compositional indeterminacy.<sup>107</sup> Denouncing the “fetish of total integration,” Ligeti calls for a reorientation of serial thought, in which “the individual moments are, within given limits, left to the composer’s discretion...[and] at every moment the composer has the possibility of taking a decision that will alter the future course of the piece entirely.”<sup>108</sup>

Ferneyhough’s compositional aesthetic is much indebted to such efforts to think beyond the formal impasse of integral serialism. The richness of his music arises in part from the recognition it embodies, that compositional consistency (the derivation of musical events from a governing idea or equation) does not guarantee compelling musical experience.<sup>109</sup> As Ferneyhough explains it, “Attempts to maintain absolute consistency from top to bottom quickly run afoul of the nonlinear mutation of psychoacoustic propensities in the listener.... The mind is a wonderfully analogical instrument, and I try to operate with this fact constantly in mind.”<sup>110</sup> Ferneyhough’s compositional approach is highly rationalized yet non-systematic. Though he shares with serialism a fully chromatic, decidedly atonal musical language, his precompositional work is essentially ad-hoc, guided by the intention of allowing the material to articulate its own demands as it is written:

Music is always an interactive thing; just as you define it, it tells you what it needs for the next stage of its development, telling you in terms that would not necessarily have been meaningful or even available at an earlier stage of composer/work evolution.... The high density of pre-compositional preparation for a piece does not set out to define *a priori* each and every event: it is meant to provide a life-support system, a dispositive of constraints and delimitations with which it is meaningful to make decisions affecting other parts of the totality.<sup>111</sup>

The “paper music” criticism, that this music was composed as a mere notational feat, without regard for its realization in performance, clearly would not stick here. For Ferneyhough, as for Adorno, precompositional schemata are “methods, vehicles of form—not form itself. They help the liberated subject in its first bouts with chaotic, undifferentiated materials, placing at its disposal certain means of preformation.”<sup>112</sup> Though meticulously rational in his compositional procedures, Ferneyhough is not interested in the Weberian striving after absolute unity. Paradoxically, his painstaking notational detail is designed to evoke a musical experience approximating the frenzy of improvisation. Berg’s mention of the “ecstasies of logic” and Boulez’s notion of “organized delirium” both point toward the presence of this transcendentalist strain in modern music, which rests fundamentally on the idea that the Dionysian potential of music is unlocked only through the labors of the most stringent rationality.

Viewing the scores suffices to convey the intense difficulty with which this music confronts the performer (see Example 1). The musical activity evoked by Ferneyhough’s scores can be described as virtuosic, in that it offers a *tour de force* of technical execution, but the effect of this virtuosity is at odds with the illusion of grace and ease which has historically been its goal. As Ross Feller writes,

The type of virtuosity involved in the performance of Ferneyhough’s compositions is self-conscious in the sense that it draws attention to the actual psychic, conceptual, and physical difficulties of a given set of tasks. Nineteenth-century virtuosity, on the other hand, draws attention to the ease with which the virtuoso performs a physically difficult set of tasks.... Complex or difficult virtuosity emphasizes the drama or spectacle of struggle.<sup>113</sup>

Example 1. From *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* for piano (1981)

For Ferneyhough, the struggle of the performer with the music is not to be glossed over, but rather highlighted, called into attention. “The typically dense and intricate textures of [Ferneyhough’s] music,” Toop writes, “do not arise from a fascination with virtuosity *per se*, but reflect the transcendentalist concerns which have always been a central factor in his work.”<sup>114</sup> The score, in its impenetrable complexity, becomes the unattainable *noumenon* which each performance strives, doomed, to capture. Ferneyhough’s “over-notation” thereby plays upon the fundamental discrepancy between the written form of music and its realization, making the chasm between the two into a central theme of his compositional practice. The intensity of performance that Ferneyhough desires arises not from a painstakingly-attained “perfect performance” of the piece, but from the spectacle of failure, the experience of the performer “losing himself in the forest of his own imperfections.”<sup>115</sup> This explains why Ferneyhough is relatively uninterested in computer music: a computer would render the score effortlessly, whereas Ferneyhough wants the score to be the site of a fantastic struggle, a violent clash of forces which is integral to the effect of his music. In this, again, Ferneyhough is rubbing against the grain of the conventional desire to smooth over the basic non-identity of score and sound. Feller writes,

[Ferneyhough’s] over-notational methods foreground what simplified notations pretend to have eliminated, namely the fact that every performance represents a (meaningful) failure to reproduce a central ‘text’ from which musical interpretation is essentially a deviation. Ambiguity and imprecision are the pillars which permit interpretation to subsist.<sup>116</sup>

In these two ways—the unmasking of virtuosity as labor and the exploitation of non-identity between musical general (score) and particular (performance)—Ferneyhough’s music takes on the antagonistic posture described in Adorno’s notion of modernism. The ferment of Ferneyhough’s music, the “perpetual state of crisis” in which it exists<sup>117</sup>, is intended to mirror the reality of modern life: “Things in the present-day world surely move rather quickly. It seems rather anomalous to expect our art to be easily understandable; I don’t see music as providing a sort of breathing space between bouts of confrontation with the world outside.”<sup>118</sup> Adorno’s conviction that art must keep pace with modernity via the highest technical *niveau* resonates here, but, as Alistair Williams notes, Ferneyhough “perceives less of a crisis in the idea of new music and progress than Adorno because he is less preoccupied with the idea of a single

advanced material.”<sup>119</sup> Indeed, Ferneyhough’s scornful mention of “the much trumpeted ‘exhaustion of material’ (or the exhaustion, perhaps, of those concentrating too exclusively upon such things)” suggests that he shares Peter Bürger’s critical assessment of Adorno’s notion of the “single advanced material.”<sup>120</sup>

In an interview, Ferneyhough mentions that what bothers him about “trivial forms” of music is that they “create the illusion of a balance and unity that corresponds less than ever to the condition of humanity and the world.”<sup>121</sup> By featuring tension and unrest in his music, by “touching upon the painful points: the dissonant, agonistic, non-commensurable,”<sup>122</sup> Ferneyhough intends for his music to jolt the listener’s consciousness, enabling new perceptual modes better fitted for the complex cognitive structures with which we are confronted in modernity. Importantly, the critical bearing of his music is rooted in the technical concerns surrounding the act of composition, not in any overt political agenda. For Ferneyhough, an artist fulfils his obligation to society through a self-conscious, rational approach to the tasks of his trade. In a virtual paraphrase of Adorno, Ferneyhough writes, “In reflecting on the history and conditions of its own creation and perception a work is already opening a window to the outside, now matter how refractory its substance may otherwise be.”<sup>123</sup>

Ferneyhough’s numerous writings and interviews are insightful guides to understanding and appreciating his music, though his discursive style often rivals his music in prolixity. In his writings Ferneyhough elaborates the conceptual opposition of *gesture* and *figure* in order to distinguish his compositional approach from tendencies he often identifies with neo-romanticism and similar movements. Ferneyhough gives these terms his own unique sense, and indeed likely chose these terms for their relative ambiguity in musical parlance: both “gesture” and “figure” are commonly-used, conventional terms, but neither has the semantic baggage of a term such as “motive.” On a basic level, gesture and figure can be thought of as synchronic and diachronic aspects of a musical event: gesture is the immediately inhering shape of a musical passage, which confers an identifiable, almost thing-like quality upon it; figure, on the other hand, is the transformational potential built into the music, its instability or nonidentity which impels it into other forms. Ferneyhough writes,

I invariably envisage a sonic event as fluctuating between two notional poles—that is, its immediate, identifiable, gestural gestalt, and its role as a launching pad for the subsequent establishment of independent linear trajectories of the gestalt’s constituent characteristics. The specifically figural aspect of an event is thus the degree to which these parametric quanta render themselves obviously amenable to such separation, extension, and re-combination in later constellations.<sup>124</sup>

For Ferneyhough, gesture and figure become metonymous with two irreconcilable approaches to composition. The gesture, in Ferneyhough’s understanding, is representational: it serves as a musical symbol for pre-defined emotional states. As such, it achieves its representational, evocative goal at the expense of establishing diachronic connections between itself and other gestures within the context of the work. As Ferneyhough writes, “The more [the] gesture is in itself an iconic representation of the emotion, and is therefore self-sufficient—either it represents the thing or it doesn’t—[...] the less contact it needs, structurally speaking, with any other gestures placed in the same context.”<sup>125</sup> This assessment of gesturally oriented composition, then, borrows much from the critique of integral serialism on the grounds that it straitjackets the composer into the mere juxtaposition of events, without a binding musical logic governing the temporal unfolding of the material. In integral serialism, the attempt to rationalize music by quantifying each parameter (pitch, duration, dynamic, and timbre or attack) leads to the

indifference of these elements to each other and to the temporal flow. The result was “the accidental coming-together of streams of innately independently generated parametric specifications” whose temporal succession was, at best, of secondary importance. Gestural thinking, as Ferneyhough sees it, leads by a different path to the same result. For the gesture, insofar as it is a bounded, semantically-loaded whole, is temporally inert; it is powerless before Adorno’s imperative “to go further, to become something new, to develop itself.” As Klaus Hübler writes, “[According to ‘gestural thinking’] the individual sound-figure is accorded a monadic existence; the more accurately it acts as an image or effigy, the less it needs a connection—indeed it bristles in a state of self-sufficiency against any syntactic association.”<sup>126</sup>

The figure, in Ferneyhough’s conception, is “a gesture whose component defining features—timbre, pitch contour, dynamic level, and so on—display a tendency toward escaping from [their] specific context in order to become independently signifying radicals, free to recombine, to ‘solidify’ into further gestural forms.” If the gesture functions as an inert motive, shorn of its developmental impulse, the figure is by contrast imbued with an almost radioactive instability: lacking the semantic immediacy of the gesture, it is impelled to seek definition through affinity with (and differentiation from) other musical elements.<sup>127</sup> In Ferneyhough’s music, meaning arises from the interplay and evolution of figures, rather than any inherent substantiality of the material. Indeed, as Hübler suggests in speaking of the “diachronic quality” of Ferneyhough’s music,

In the progressive unfolding of their potentiality, there accrues to [the elements of the music] a meaning and aura that they could not attain in their isolation.... Thus the source of Ferneyhough’s expressivity lies not in a *hic et nunc*, quasi-existential revelation, but rather manifests itself in the (discursive) motion of the work, in which it is not so much states of beginning and ending that are of primary significance, but rather the moments of “no longer” and “not yet”.<sup>128</sup>

Ferneyhough’s distinction between what he calls “gestural” and “figural” modes of composition can fruitfully be viewed in the context of similar formal conflicts in the history of music, and like most of these historical theoretical arguments, it overstates its case. The opposition of gesture and figure loses credibility when Ferneyhough equates gestural composition with a crude *Affektenlehre*. This conflation seems unwarranted. Though gesture in its extreme state could be thought of as purely denotive, evoking unambiguously a codified cognitive response (in Adorno’s words, “as absolute signification” which “ceases to be music and passes, falsely, into language,”), there is no necessary connection between music that is juxtapositional (rather than developmental) in conception and the Pavlovian “cause and affect” that Ferneyhough decries. The serial works of Stravinsky offer examples of music that is gestural in that it is not concerned with thematic development in the Beethovenian sense, yet which does not aim by any means to evoke determinate emotional or cognitive states.

### *Wolfgang Rihm*

If Ferneyhough’s music accentuates the futurist overtones of Adorno’s thought, the music of Wolfgang Rihm represents an opposing tendency: not the intrepid exploration of new techniques, but the pluralistic rethinking of historical models and their significance. Rihm’s compositional output is of such a vast and variegated character that one hesitates to attempt to describe it in general terms. (Indeed, this marks one of the most striking contrasts between Rihm and Ferneyhough, since the latter has argued for the necessity of stylistic continuity within one’s own

works.)<sup>129</sup> Rihm has aroused the most attention—both positive and negative—through his willingness to flout the modernist “canon of prohibitions” and employ historically suggestive material, sometimes even writing tonal passages that seem to refer overtly to a particular historical milieu. For better or worse, in the first decade or so after his debutante success with the composition *Morphonie, Sektor IV* at the Donaueschingen Music Days in 1974, Rihm was grouped with a movement in German music generally known as the “New Simplicity” (*Neue Einfachheit*), a reaction, like the contemporary American phenomenon of minimalism, against the compositional strictures of high-modernist post-serialism. The “New Simplicity” has been interpreted both as the long-overdue renunciation of what Hans Werner Henze christened “*musica negativa*”—a morbid mentality (often traced to Adorno) in which “the negative of our time...is reflected as in a mirror image, where the ugly itself represents the artistic, where ‘shattering of the material’ is always to be practiced and celebrated,”<sup>130</sup>—and as the puerile shirking of the demands of modernity, a “willfully regressive neo-romantic tendency...a quintessentially German aberration within late-Modernism.”<sup>131</sup>

The breadth of Rihm’s oeuvre now rules out assigning his music to a single stylistic tendency, no matter how broadly defined. Yet the questions stemming from his affinity with seemingly anti-modernist sentiments remain relevant to the interpretation of his work. The reason for this is likely to be found in the deliberately ambiguous role of historical consciousness in Rihm’s music, the way it chafes subtly against the doctrinal carapace of modernism. As Morag Grant writes, “Rihm does not accept the past as it is: it is continually called into question. Such questioning would be an implicit part of Adorno’s modernism, but the form it takes in Rihm’s compositions is of a quite different nature, since the tension is invoked at the very surface of the music.”<sup>132</sup> Breaking with the high modernism of Boulez’s generation, Rihm allows traces of history to percolate to the surface, to stand alongside other, less semantically-laden components, as “islands in a modernist style.”<sup>133</sup> But are these “islands” in fact *terra firma*, tradition called up as a bulwark against the historical vertigo that characterizes the experience of modernity? Or are they rather framed in such a way as to give the lie to the apparent substantiality and safety of the past?

We have seen that in Adorno’s understanding, modernism cannot sever itself from history, but it can submerge history through the negation of conventions. History is addressed in the confrontation with the material, which in modern art is rationalized, purified, bleached of its historical and semantic traces.<sup>134</sup> Modernism negates the past by declaring the new: history shows up in modernist works only as absence, empty space. The works themselves give no outward evidence of the struggle with history to which they bear witness as artifacts. If this is an idealized picture of modernism’s relation to history, it is at the same time not an inaccurate one. What is important is less whether art can in fact unfetter itself completely from the chains of history, than its unmistakable intention to do so.

In this connection, it may be illuminating to consider Stravinsky, a composer whose engagement with history under the auspices of “neoclassicism” can be seen as a precedent to Rihm’s situation and the issues it involves. Stravinsky was the first composer associated with modernism to openly embrace historical idioms as an integral part of his musical practice. His “recompositions” of Pergolesi in *Pulcinella* (1920) and Tchaikovsky in *The Fairy’s Kiss* (1928) represent a remarkable about-face by a composer who had a decade earlier lain one of the foundation stones of musical modernism with *The Rite of Spring*. For Adorno, this “historical enervation” was a betrayal of modernism, a retreat into the very historical molds that modern art ought to explode.<sup>135</sup> But, as Adorno later moved toward recognizing, noting that “probably the

conventional separation of traditional and innovative moments is too mechanical altogether,” Schoenberg and Stravinsky—who are brought forth in *Philosophy of Modern Music* to represent “Progress” versus “Restoration”, respectively—should be reconceived as the twin aspects of modernism.<sup>136</sup> Stravinsky’s historical promiscuity does not in all instances amount to a passive endorsement of the status quo, nor were the composers of the Second Viennese School at all innocent of the same sort of engagement with historical forms which should rightly be seen as an integral component of modernism.<sup>137</sup> As Bürger writes, “The longing for regression is an eminently modern phenomenon, a reaction to the advancing rationalization process. It should not be tabooed, but worked out.”<sup>138</sup>

Adorno’s treatment of Stravinsky offers a striking illustration of how the modernist antagonism toward history takes an irrational turn, coming to resemble the *repression* of traditions, rather than their confrontation. Years after writing *Philosophy of New Music*, Adorno seems to have rethought the “canon of prohibitions” which had underwritten his earlier critique of Stravinsky: “Elements of past art become qualitatively new when they surface again later.... It would be a mistake...to hypostasize historically grown prohibitions as though they were irrevocable.... [The] return of the tabooed should not take the form of a harking-back to unproblematic categories and solutions: rather, what may legitimately return are past problems.”<sup>139</sup> The idea that emerges from Adorno’s later writings suggests that history may indeed be evoked within modernist music, but only if it is presented as a problem—somehow estranged and shorn of its immediacy—will art be able to maintain its critical edge.

Rihm’s willingness to give voice to history in his music is surely a factor in the remarkable public success of his work. Of course, it is also the grounds on which Rihm can be attacked as a post-modernist reactionary, according to the belief that traditionalist tendencies in art and political conservatism feed at the same socio-cultural trough. But if Rihm manages to frame these gestures in a way that denatures their apparent semantic solvency, he actually succeeds in enlarging the field of possibility for musical modernism, bringing critique to a level of consciousness that had hitherto been impossible. As Rudolf Frisius argues, Rihm’s antipathy for the abstraction of the high modernist avant-garde should not conceal his fundamental agreement with its project: “For Rihm [a direct, more publicly accessible expression] does not amount to an idyllic evocation of the past. On the contrary: his music sounds the most frightened, unsettled, and ambivalent—at times even manic, possessed—precisely when it quotes the past.”<sup>140</sup> The historical latency audible in Rihm’s music, then, does not necessarily betoken an uncritical, nostalgic embrace of the past; instead, it can be seen as a thematicization, within the music, of the confrontation with history that defines the modernist impulse. It is this aspect that commentators have latched onto, sensing in Rihm’s music the possibility of a modernist practice in which the taboo on historical traces is relaxed, where construction and subjectivity can be brought into dialectical orbit. Alistair Williams writes,

While total pastiche and assemblages of objects with thoroughly predefined meanings hardly encourage critical reflection, there is a space for a compositional practice—admittedly always unpredictable—that includes objects with semantic associations, facilitating intertextual or multitextual levels of meaning as well as those deriving from internal configurations.... When sensitively conceived...referential music has the capacity to find affinities and to enable intersections between different traditions. In such cases the traditions themselves are changed because the meanings of the objects yielded are touched by composition and reception strategies that may awaken new latencies.<sup>141</sup>

In discussing Rihm’s *Third String Quartet* (“*Im innersten*”), Peter Andraschke argues that Rihm’s musical language is characterized by “sovereignty with regard to conventions”; the past

is “not slavishly repeated; it appears inwardly processed [*verarbeitet*] and reshaped into his individual syntax.”<sup>142</sup> Andraschke interprets referential passages in Rihm as musical “clearings” [*Auflichtung*] whose significance derives from their place within the total composition.<sup>143</sup> The emphasis on “sovereignty” in Andraschke’s gloss is noteworthy, in that it highlights the dialectic of freedom and constraint that is so formative to the modernist project. This dialectic functions on two primary levels: first, the jettisoning of traditional forms and genres results in a state of aesthetic nominalism, in which works are intended as unique types whose structural unfolding answers only to its own self-posed demands. If this leads to an unprecedented degree of compositional freedom, it also potentially undermines the very basis of musical meaning. Second, the negation of conventions itself becomes a convention of sorts, one which can easily turn from emancipatory to oppressive—as Rihm quips, “You can’t create art with taboos.”<sup>144</sup> Adorno, too, acknowledges that the strictures of modern art inevitably progress from gestures of liberation to dogmatic restrictions:

In the process of change art habitually resorts to elements that it had previously decided to do without. This may explain in part why it is that, to this day, so-called revolutions in art have turned out to be reactionary. Prohibitions have a regressive quality. This applies to the ban on unbounded plenitude and complexity, explaining why such prohibitions as these are on their way out.<sup>145</sup>

Although Rihm’s music is unmistakably modernist, it is at the same time quite distant from the often austere sonic universe of postwar serialism: this is music that wears its subjectivity on its sleeve. In addition to embracing aspects of the musical past that have been submerged in the dominant high-modernist discourse, Rihm takes an approach to the act of composition that is at odds with the modernist trend toward rationalization and explication. In his writings, Rihm has maintained a stoic silence with regard to his compositional technique. His deliberate disregard for analytical matters is noteworthy, given the tendency of 20<sup>th</sup> century composers to take up theoretical writing as an integral part of their profession. Indeed, the label of neo-romantic would apply better to Rihm’s meta-compositional persona than to his music. Whereas analytical discourse, for such composers as Boulez, Babbitt, and Stockhausen, becomes a necessary complement to highly-rationalized music, Rihm seeks to create an immediacy and directness of musical experience which exhausts its meaning in the moment of performance, thus rendering explanatory efforts superfluous.<sup>146</sup> As Rihm puts it, “I believe...that from the beginning I’ve been in search of the unanalyzable artwork.”<sup>147</sup>

Rihm’s reticence in this regard, ironically, says a great deal about him as a composer. It’s not that Rihm demurs from talking about his music because he finds it tiresome—and it’s certainly not for want of a rapt audience for his analytical musings. Rather, Rihm’s very compositional approach precludes the sort of reasoned, explicatory discourse that has become *de rigueur* for contemporary composers. His doctrine of “*musikalische Freiheit*” places a premium on spontaneity and subjectivity. The precompositional labor undergirding modernist music since the Second Viennese School, serving to orient the composer in an environment of dizzying freedom, has no place in Rihm’s musical workshop. This is not to say that Rihm composes effortlessly or without reflection, but that his approach is thoroughly anti-systematic, and his music often suggests an image of composition as an almost improvisatory act. If this seems to run athwart the theoretical, constructivist tendencies of modernist music, it at the same time resonates strongly with Adorno’s enigmatic notion of “informal music,” a program whose influence on his compositional thinking Rihm has acknowledged.<sup>148</sup> In his 1961 essay, “Vers une musique informelle,” (“Toward an Informal Music”) Adorno adumbrates a post-serial mode

of composition in which the restrictions once enforced by the twelve-tone row have been sublimated to “second nature,” no longer external to the composer:

What is meant [by “*musique informelle*”] is a type of music which has discarded all forms which are external or abstract or which confront it in an inflexible way. At the same time, although such music should be completely free of anything irreducibly alien to itself or superimposed on it, it should nevertheless constitute itself in an objectively compelling way, in the musical substance itself, and not in terms of external laws.<sup>149</sup>

Postwar serialism answers the demand of nominalism at the cost of this subjective moment: the formal independence of the work is achieved through means which exalt the compositional procedures or the state of the material above the ability of the composer to “[make] a decision that will alter the future course of the piece entirely.” (Ligeti) Adorno’s notion of “informal music” suggests the possibility of the compositional discipline demanded by the contemporary level of technique being united with the subjective presence that would prevent the music from degenerating to clockwork. “Informal music” is both nominalistic, in that the forms it creates are unique to each work, and subjective, because the particular contours of the music are “neither imposed from the outside nor [do they] emerge from the interior of the works; instead, [they] spring from their being reflected in subjective reason.”<sup>150</sup>

Not only does Rihm endorse an essentially Adornian notion of musical nominalism—asserting that “musical form possesses the possibility of being form *sui generis*”—his music confronts head-on what Adorno took to be the immanent challenge of such a situation: how nominalistically conceived works can maintain the level of formal consistency without which they “flow away unheard,” to borrow a phrase from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Matter-of-factness postulates the elimination of pre-given forms, of flourishes and ornamental designs and of all residual elements of an overarching sense of form. Instead, the work of art is supposed to be organized from below. What is absent here is any kind of guarantee or promise that art, after having thus blasted away its overarching form, will be able to unify the *membra disiecta* of a work in any way at all.<sup>151</sup>

If the radical subjectivity in Rihm’s music is a laudable corrective to the modernist tendency toward mechanistic predetermination, there are nonetheless moments in his music where compositional freedom shades into capriciousness. Two such instances are found in Rihm’s *Fourth String Quartet* (1980-81), a work comprised of characteristically diverse material, from lyrical lines reminiscent of Ravel or Debussy to harsh *sforzato* clusters and wispy harmonics. In the second movement (mm. 48-58), the two violins play six full measures of tremolo on a piercingly high B-flat—marked *ffff* and “immer geräuschhafter” (“noisier and noisier”)—followed abruptly by a double bar marking a new section, marked “Andante (Aria)” (see Example 2). Now the two violins and the viola play sustained *cantabile* lines over an even, eighth-note accompaniment in the cello. This passage is brief, soon subsiding to less stable material, but it is substantial enough to mark an extreme contrast with the preceding measures. A similar juxtaposition occurs near the end of the third and final movement (mm. 46-57). In this passage, slow, subdued strains of *pianissimo* sustained chords are suddenly interrupted by a loud, forceful interjection marked *subito allegro molto*. This passage lasts just three measures, promptly giving way to the quiet, somber gestures with which the piece ends.

In both of these cases, the ruptures in the musical fabric seem almost too deliberate, as if Rihm is showing off just how unpredictable he can be. At its best, the impulsiveness of Rihm’s music is invigorating, but at times such as these it is simply obnoxious, a cheap thrill. Perhaps this is simply the risk that this music runs, perched as it is so precipitously

on the brink of pure, ungrounded spontaneity. Rihm's music does not offer the guarantee of formal cohesion whose absence Adorno seems to lament. At times, even, Rihm seems intent on writing music that gives witness to the crisis of formal nominalism, articulating the awkwardness of its condition in the stilted, fractured manner of its unfolding. Again it is a matter of making manifest the latent conflicts of modernism: not only does Rihm thematize the confrontation with tradition, his music often seems to be "about" the existential predicament of modern music, its lack of a *raison d'être*, self-positing or external.

Example 2. From *Fourth String Quartet*. (1980-81)

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 47-52) features four staves with complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth-note runs and glissandi. Dynamics range from *ffff* to *ff (molto vibr.)*. The second system (measures 53-58) is marked "Andante (Aria)" and "cantabile", with dynamics ranging from *pp* to *f*. It includes vibrato and non-vibrato markings for various instruments.

The radical subjectivity audible in Rihm's music voices (perhaps unwittingly) a critique of the notion that what modern music needs is more of the subject: his music declares, "This is what subjectivity sounds like,"—not the warm, human essence that was imagined to oppose the icy sterility of serialism and its ilk, but caprice, wantonness, even cruelty: the aimless, desperate plight of alienated individuality. As Seth Brodsky writes, "Form in Rihm's music, the score's path from first to last measure, acquires the unclassifiable as the contours of a violent spill; shape

is dictated by a kind of creative emergency. A Rihm work does not develop; it survives, as if just un-caged, and goes wherever it can in order to keep going.”<sup>152</sup>

Both Ferneyhough and Rihm offer vivid examples of how contemporary music can be invigorated from within. In very different ways, their work forges paths toward an artistic practice that is modernist in spirit—in its critical orientation toward conventions and its intention to challenge fundamentally the listener’s assumptions—and yet manages to move beyond the sonic world of postwar serialism and to question much of the dogma to which modernism—like every ideology—inevitably fell victim. Of course, many more versions of musical modernism are imaginable: Rihm’s and Ferneyhough’s music (insofar as the work of either composer can be conceived as a unity) represent just two possible responses to the peculiar set of problems and demands articulated by Adorno.

## Afterword

This essay represents a mere fragment of what could be written about Adorno's relevance for contemporary music. In attempting to convey the broad contours of the issues treated here—Adorno, his theoretical successors, and his influence on contemporary music—I have of necessity neglected certain angles of thought that, had they been pursued, may have rendered this whole endeavor more fruitful. Foremost among these would be a thoroughgoing historico-philosophical grounding of Adorno, tracing his peculiar complex of ideas back to its roots in Freud, Marx, and most significantly, German idealism. On the other hand, our understanding of modernism as a cultural movement would benefit from a comparative survey of the various strains of modernist thinking in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Adorno's is by no means the only—or even the most influential—version of modernism, and its features could be brought into greater relief by contrasting Adorno's thought with that of other prominent theorists of modernity.

More work could be done, too, in applying the theoretical insights of such writers as Bürger, Habermas, and Bourdieu—all of whom focus primarily on literature or visual arts—more directly to modern music. The conceptual frameworks of these writers are for the most part general enough to be transposed without great difficulty, and the theoretical discourse about music could thereby be greatly enriched. It is likely no coincidence that sociological approaches have been least forthcoming in music of all the arts, given that music's connection to the empirical, social world is arguably less substantial than that of literature or painting, for instance. The intangible, ephemeral character of music certainly affects how society is reflected within musical practices, but it by no means argues against the possibility of a sophisticated, non-reductionist sociology of music. Such a discipline would likely take its cue from the authors mentioned above.

Perhaps one of the most exciting avenues open to contemporary musicology would be an Adorno-informed investigation of critical impulses in popular music. Though Adorno himself was famously contemptuous of the “heteronomous” domain, believing that even dissident messages in pop music are inevitably short-circuited by the market forces to which they are ultimately subject, we can now recognize the danger of generalizing about the political efficacy of music based on its alleged autonomy or lack thereof. If the recalcitrance of autonomous art can serve as a tacit endorsement of the status quo, it is likewise true that popular art's complicity in life praxis via the capitalist market does not mean that it is automatically defanged of its potential for social critique. What is retained from Adorno is the argument that such critique can manifest itself on the level of musical structure, as well as in the overt “message” of song lyrics. The social content of music, whether critical or quietistic, often runs athwart musicians' intentions, and it would be the task of a speculative musicology to illustrate this complex relationship between sound and ideology at work in popular music.

Strangely enough, considering the convoluted richness of his thought, Adorno's writings can be boiled down to a simple proposition: that music of the concert tradition, in order to survive, must somehow show itself to be relevant to today's world without “selling out” and simply accommodating that world in its present state. What I hope to have demonstrated is the greater detail of these considerations, the historical and philosophical factors underlying this opposition at the heart of aesthetic modernism. Having severed itself from the social processes in which it was historically embedded, contemporary music must articulate its own necessity without succumbing to a ruthless means-ends logic that would guarantee its annihilation. It must explain—to itself, as much as to its audience—why the hermeticism and difficulty of modern art

are defensible on social grounds, rather than exalt these characteristics as abstract desiderata. Likewise, if modern art is to continue its role as gadfly, it must seek new avenues of expression and new means of making its critique heard, even at the expense of its own hard-won autonomy. There is nothing radical about the cloistered, self-congratulatory caricature to which the avant-garde has succumbed. Adorno's conception of the modernist artwork as a "message in a bottle" will no longer suffice. A modernism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century will have to find a new metaphor for its task, one that preserves a unique identity for art and yet conveys simultaneously its social relevance and its human essence.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Richard Wolin, "The De-Aestheticization of Art: On Adorno's Aesthetische Theorie," *Telos* 49 (Fall 1979), 106.
- <sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 1996), 7.
- <sup>3</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Routledge Keegan Paul, 1984), 478-79.
- <sup>4</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 380.
- <sup>5</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 344.
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 54.
- <sup>7</sup> See Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991), 181.
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Leppert, in Theodor Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 513-14.
- <sup>9</sup> Indeed, Adorno's fixation on the Second Viennese School to the exclusion of other compositional trends of the period can be seen as one of Adorno's most conspicuous theoretical blind spots, and this apparent myopia is mirrored in Adorno's treatment of music history, which tends toward the Austro-Germanic tradition stemming from Bach. Rose Subotnik, attempting to make sense of this facet of Adorno's work, explains: "Adorno seems to think of music as part of a single synchronic cultural structure that also includes all of the social, historical, and artistic constructs contemporaneous with music. Therefore, he probably assumes that music appearing at widely different times belongs to cultural systems with relatively little in common, and that it is not valid to treat music throughout Western history as if it constituted a single medium, appropriately addressed by one set of questions." See *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 42-43. That such an approach may lead one to overstate the discontinuities between historical periods is an obvious weakness, but the logic of this method for Adorno's project is clear: if one is concerned with the connection between music and contemporary society, it makes sense to focus on the music that is more or less contemporaneous with the emergence of capitalism and the establishment of the bourgeoisie. The tensions in music and society that are for Adorno the distinguishing mark of modernity only begin to emerge in the wake of the French revolution. Thus Adorno's take on modern music, though it focuses on music of the bourgeois period to the virtual exclusion of previous music, is grounded in the theoretical postulate that the puzzles of modernity with which he is concerned are bound up with their contemporaneous cultural forms, and that earlier music is not inferior, but rather irrelevant to the questions he seeks to answer.
- <sup>10</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music: The Avant-Garde since 1945* (New York: George Braziller, 1981), 43.
- <sup>11</sup> Oliver Neighbour et al., *The New Grove Second Viennese School* (New York: Norton, 1983), 154-55.
- <sup>12</sup> Adorno, "Why Is the New Art So Hard to Understand?" in *Essays on Music*, 128.
- <sup>13</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York: Seabury, 1973), 32.
- <sup>14</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 213.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Hindemith, *The Craft of Musical Composition, Volume 1* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1937), 7, 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Hindemith, 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Hindemith, 12.
- <sup>18</sup> Hindemith, 22.
- <sup>19</sup> Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 76.
- <sup>20</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 32.
- <sup>21</sup> Adorno, "Music, Language, and Composition," in *Essays on Music*, 114. An understanding of Adorno's notion of material may be quickened by evocation of the *palimpsest*, a manuscript whose text has been effaced and written over: just as the material in Adorno's conception serves to highlight the discursive, social nature of composition itself (quite apart from such aspects as they manifest in performance and reception), "the palimpsest foregrounds the fact that all writing takes place in the presence of other writings—that it is not people who 'speak' language, but language which 'speaks' people." <<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hf10243.html>>
- <sup>22</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 34.
- <sup>23</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 214.
- <sup>24</sup> Quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 43. See also Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 100: "A decisive quality regarding the value of compositions and even regarding entire formal types is dependent upon the depth, extent, and penetration of the continuational figures. Music proves its greatness in that moment of its

progression in which a piece really becomes a composition—in which it is animated by its own inner weight, transcending the here-and-now of thematic definition from which it proceeds.”

<sup>25</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 66. There is certainly a Germanic bias in this fixation on “becoming” as a model for the understanding of both individual compositions and the musical material to which these works are ultimately subsumed. Adorno focuses on the Bach-Beethoven-Brahms tradition of “developing variation,” which, as Carl Dahlhaus describes it, “bestows on [musical events]...a meaning that they would not have in themselves, as isolated figures. The whole significance of the musical instant, unimportant in itself, is that it points the way forward to something greater.” See Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 49. Adorno’s essentialism rears its head here, as he asserts that this developmental aspect “lies in the nature of music itself and will not be denied.” See Theodor Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music* (London: Verso, 1998), 151. That being said, for Adorno this quality is not so much a necessary condition of music as a goal, an aspiration whose possibility is, however, hard-wired into music’s temporal mode of existence. See footnote 17, above.

<sup>26</sup> Anton Webern is guilty of exactly this in his effusion that “Ever since music has been written, all the great composers have instinctively had [twelve-tone composition] as a goal.” See Anton Webern, *The Path to the New Music* (Bryn Mawr: Theodor Presser Company, 1963), 42.

<sup>27</sup> Buck-Morss, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 428.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 33. See also Paddison, 91.

<sup>31</sup> Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1966), 237.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno’s effort to redeem autonomous art from its banishment to the Marxian doghouse of ideological superstructure represents one of his most valuable contributions to the revitalization of Marxism undertaken by the thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Adorno sought to locate critical, progressive impulses within what was, sociologically speaking, the art of the dominant classes. On the most fundamental level, art’s posture of distance, its conceit of independence—though false—was for Adorno an implicitly defiant gesture: “All works of art, including affirmative ones, are *ipso facto* polemical. The very notion of a conservative work of art is somehow absurd. By emphatically severing all ties with the empirical world, art in an unconscious way expresses its desire to change that world.” *Aesthetic Theory*, 253.

<sup>33</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 29-32; *Aesthetic Theory*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> See Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 9: “The general public, totally cut off from the production of new music, is alienated by the outward characteristics of such music. The deepest currents present in this music proceed, however, from exactly those sociological and anthropological foundations peculiar to that public. The dissonances which horrify them testify to their own conditions; for that reason alone do they find them unbearable.”

<sup>35</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 121.

<sup>36</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 358.

<sup>37</sup> See *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 33-34.

<sup>38</sup> On this topic see Warren Dwight Allen, *Philosophies of Music History* (New York: Dover, 1962) and Martinu Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

<sup>39</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 422-23.

<sup>40</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 297.

<sup>41</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 45.

<sup>43</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Reaktion und Fortschritt,” in *Digitale Bibliothek Band 97: Theodor W. Adorno: Gesammelte Schriften*, 13929-13930. (“Es wird, mit der Intention auf Fortschritt, nicht behauptet, daß man heute besser komponieren könne oder dank geschichtlicher Gnade bessere Werke hervorbringe als zur Zeit Beethovens.... Den Schauplatz eines Fortschrittes in Kunst liefern nicht ihre einzelnen Werke sondern ihr Material. [...] Fortschritt heißt nichts anderes als je und je das Material auf der fortgeschrittensten Stufe seiner geschichtlichen Dialektik ergreifen.”)

<sup>44</sup> On this topic, see Subotnick, “Why is Adorno’s Music Criticism the Way It Is?” in *Developing Variations*, 42-56.

<sup>45</sup> See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 298-303: “Continuity can be constructed only from a perspective of a great temporal distance, if at all. It is probably more correct to say that art history is a series of nodal points than to view it as being continuous.... The attempt to outline a non-contradictory theory about art history must be forsaken, for its essence is indeed highly contradictory.”

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 8.

<sup>47</sup> This essay can be found in Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 181-202.

<sup>48</sup> Adorno, "The Aging of the New Music," in *Essays on Music*, 189.

<sup>49</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 436.

<sup>50</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 415.

<sup>51</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 30-31.

<sup>52</sup> Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia*, 256.

<sup>53</sup> Validating the Hegelian dictum that "the owl of Minerva flies at dusk," the contempt for given forms of composers such as Schumann corresponds to the first theoretical considerations of sonata form in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See Charles Rosen, *Sonata Forms* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Subotnik, 274.

<sup>55</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 104.

<sup>56</sup> Subotnik, 271; see also Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 411.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, lii.

<sup>58</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 21-22.

<sup>59</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49.

<sup>60</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 18.

<sup>61</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 63.

<sup>62</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 87.

<sup>63</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 20.

<sup>64</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

<sup>65</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 12-13, 47.

<sup>66</sup> See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 260-61: "The question, popular among all shades of apologists of tradition, whether certain modern compositions are 'still music or something else' is beside the point. What needs to be done instead is to analyze what desubstantialization of art means concretely.... At the present time art is most lively precisely when it subverts the validity of its generic concept. Then again, this subversion is nothing new but a familiar theme in art history: there has always been a tendency to break the taboo on impure or hybrid types."

<sup>67</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 35.

<sup>68</sup> On this point, see Jameson, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Bourdieu, 37.

<sup>70</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 2:397.

<sup>71</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Incomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 9.

<sup>72</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 334.

<sup>73</sup> "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," 9. Habermas's curiously tentative mention in this passage of "specialists who seem more adept at being logical" in given fields of culture is noted by Martin Jay, who calls attention to the danger, inherent in Habermas' tripartite scheme, of effacing the peculiarity of aesthetic rationality as a domain of specialized knowledge. Jay asserts, "Precisely how [the] increased mastery of technique can be seen as rational in the same evolutionary sense that Habermas attributes to the other types of rationality is not clear. For there are certainly many other standards of judgment in aesthetic matters besides technical virtuosity which makes the idea of artistic progress highly problematic." See Martin Jay, "Habermas and Modernism," in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 137-38. Jay's assumption that artistic progress would manifest as "mastery of technique" or "technical virtuosity" seems unfounded, especially if one accepts Bourdieu's thesis that the artistic developments always serve to articulate a new conception of the "field of production." Though Bourdieu's dynamic model of "position-takings" is certainly more suggestive of a cyclical pattern than of linear progress, it is nonetheless insightful here. If the work of artists, however inwardly focused on questions of technique, inevitably shapes the orientation of the field as a whole, artist's actions can help to effect the "changed constellation of art and the lifeworld" prescribed by Habermas. See Habermas, "Questions and Counterquestions," in *Habermas and Modernity*, 202.

<sup>74</sup> Adorno, "Why Is the New Art So Hard to Understand?", in *Essays on Music*, 132.

<sup>75</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 337.

<sup>76</sup> Carl Dahlhaus presents a devastating critique of Adorno's autonomy aesthetic in his essay "Thesen über engagierte Musik," in which he argues that Adorno's theory of the "polemical a priori" of autonomous art is no longer tenable. More importantly for the current context, he points to a neglected dialectical relationship between

autonomy and “critical” function, asserting that the two need not always coincide: “In a society that is maintained not through drastic, tangible external coercion, but rather through the subtle domination of the “consciousness industry,” ... autonomous art, however rebelliously it may behave, must forfeit the polemical content it would have had in a condition of open and unconcealed suppression.... Autonomy must be suppressed, if the music is to act “critically”; in and of itself, autonomy is indifferent.” (“In einer Gesellschaft...die nicht durch drastisch fühlbaren äußeren Zwang, sondern durch die sanftere Gewalt der ‘Bewußtseinsindustrie’...aufrechterhalten wird, muß autonome Kunst, so revoltierend sie sich gebärden mag, den polemischen Gehalt einbüßen, den sie in einem Zustand offener und unverhohlener Unterdrückung hätte.... Um als ‘kritische’ Musik zu fungieren, müßte die autonome unterdrückt sein; von sich aus ist sie indifferent.”) Carl Dahlhaus, “Thesen über engagierte Musik,” in *Musik zwischen Engagement und Kunst*, ed. Otto Kolleritsch, vol. 3 of *Studien zur Wertungsforschung* (Graz: Universal Edition, 1972), 14.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Jay, “Habermas and Modernism,” 128.

<sup>78</sup> Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project,” 13.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 132.

<sup>80</sup> Rod Eley, “A History of the Scratch Orchestra, 1969-72,” in Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (London: Latimer New Dimensions Limited, 1974), 22.

<sup>81</sup> Eley, 28-29.

<sup>82</sup> Eley, 29.

<sup>83</sup> Dick Higgins, “Theory and Reception,” in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (New York: Academy Editions, 1998), 235.

<sup>84</sup> Higgins, 230.

<sup>85</sup> Habermas, “Questions and Counterquestions,” 202.

<sup>86</sup> Ken Friedman, “Fluxus and Company,” in *The Fluxus Reader*, 247.

<sup>87</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 50.

<sup>88</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 54.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Otilia B.F. Arantes and Paulo Eduardo Arantes, “The Neo-Enlightenment Aesthetics of Jürgen Habermas,” *Cultural Critique* 49 (Fall 2001), 46.

<sup>90</sup> Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project,” 11-12.

<sup>91</sup> Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project,” 11.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Bürger, “The Decline of Modernism,” in *The Decline of Modernism* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1992), 46.

<sup>93</sup> See Herbert Marcuse, “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). “By affirmative culture is meant that culture of the bourgeois epoch which led in the course of its own development to the segregation from civilization of the mental and spiritual world as an independent realm of value that is also considered superior to civilization. Its decisive characteristic is the assertion of a universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable world that must be unconditionally affirmed: a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence, yet realizable by every individual for himself ‘from within,’ without any transformation of the state of fact.” (95)

<sup>94</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Schoenberg and the New Music* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 17.

<sup>95</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 321.

<sup>96</sup> Bürger, “The Decline of Modernism,” 36. In Adorno’s defense, see *Aesthetic Theory*, 53-54.

<sup>97</sup> Bürger, “The Decline of Modernism,” 41.

<sup>98</sup> Dahlhaus, *Schoenberg and the New Music*, 19-20.

<sup>99</sup> Dahlhaus, *Schoenberg and the New Music*, 22.

<sup>100</sup> Brian Ferneyhough, *Collected Writings*, ed. Richard Toop (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1995), 243.

<sup>101</sup> See the two-part “Complexity Forum” in *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 1 (Winter, 1993) and 32, no. 1 (Winter, 1994).

<sup>102</sup> Richard Toop, “On Complexity,” *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 1 (Winter, 1993): 48.

<sup>103</sup> Toop, “On Complexity,” 43.

<sup>104</sup> This is what Adorno is referring to when he speaks of “music’s masochism,” its tendency to resort to musically extrinsic structural models, rather than “shape itself in freedom.” (*Quasi una Fantasia*, 292-93)

<sup>105</sup> Jonathan Harvey, “Brian Ferneyhough,” *The Musical Times* 120, no. 1639 (September, 1979), 723.

<sup>106</sup> Györgi Ligeti, “Metamorphoses of Musical Form,” *Die Reihe* 7 (1965), 5-19.

<sup>107</sup> Ligeti, 10. As Ligeti notes, many of his critiques had been anticipated a decade earlier by Adorno: "Twelve-tone technique contradicts dynamics. The technique neutralizes the dynamic impulse of the work from one sound to another; thus it does not permit any dynamic impulse of the totality to emerge. It devaluates the concepts of melos and theme, and thus eliminates the actually dynamic-formal categories of motivic development, thematic development, and transition." (*Philosophy of Modern Music*, 99)

<sup>108</sup> Ligeti, 11-12.

<sup>109</sup> See Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia*, 289.

<sup>110</sup> Brian Ferneyhough, "Shattering the Vessels of Received Wisdom," *Perspectives of New Music* 28, no. 2 (1990): 27. See also Ross Feller, "Resistant Strains of Postmodernism: The Music of Helmut Lachenmann and Brian Ferneyhough," in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judith Irene Lochhead (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2001), 252: "Speaking in general terms, a total serial piece, like much process-oriented music, begins with the initiation of a process and ends when the process ends, usually after most, if not all, permutations have been used. Ferneyhough's compositional approach is much broader in scope and more narrowly focused on systemic procedure in order to create, or uncover, inherent contradictions in the system itself."

<sup>111</sup> Ferneyhough, "Shattering the Vessels of Received Wisdom," 20.

<sup>112</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 206.

<sup>113</sup> Ross Feller, "Multicursal Labyrinths in the Work of Brian Ferneyhough" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, 1994), 6, 60-1.

<sup>114</sup> Richard Toop, "Brian Ferneyhough," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 15 February 2004), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

<sup>115</sup> Ferneyhough, *Collected Writings*, 213.

<sup>116</sup> Feller, "Multicursal Labyrinths in the Work of Brian Ferneyhough," 63. See also Brian Ferneyhough, "Form, Figure, Style: An Intermediate Assessment," *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 1 (Winter, 1993), 37.

<sup>117</sup> Richard Toop, "Ferneyhough's Dungeons of Invention," *The Musical Times* 128, no. 1737 (November, 1987), 624.

<sup>118</sup> Ferneyhough, "Shattering the Vessels of Received Wisdom," 10. This assertion is borne out wonderfully in the first line of an anonymous online review of Ferneyhough's Second String Quartet: "When you hear Ferneyhough's music you say to yourself is the world really that horrible." Compare Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 138: "In a total society art should bring chaos to order rather than the other way around. The chaotic features of authentic modern art only appear to stand in contradiction to its spirit. In reality, they are the ciphers of a critique of spurious second nature; they seem to be saying: 'This is how chaotic your order actually is.'"

<sup>119</sup> Alistair Williams, "Adorno and the Semantics of Modernism," *Perspectives of New Music* 37, no.2 (Summer 1999), 34.

<sup>120</sup> Brian Ferneyhough, "Speaking with Tongues," interview with Paul Driver, *Contemporary Music Review* 5 (1989), 162.

<sup>121</sup> Lutz Lesle, "Die Wunde zeigen: Der englische Komponist Brian Ferneyhough im Gespräch mit Lutz Lesle," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 155, no. 1 (January, 1994), 43. ("Probematisch an diesen 'Trivialformen' (A-B-A oder Refrain) ist, daß sie eine Balance und Einheit vorspiegeln, die dem Zustand des Menschen und der Welt weniger denn je entsprechen.")

<sup>122</sup> Lesle, 42. ("...wenn man eine zeitkritische Musik zu schreiben geneigt ist, muß man den Schmerzpunkt berühren: das Dissonante, Agonistische, Nicht-Kommensurable.")

<sup>123</sup> Ferneyhough, *Collected Writings*, 66.

<sup>124</sup> Ferneyhough, "Shattering the Vessels of Received Wisdom," 25.

<sup>125</sup> Ferneyhough, *Collected Writings*, 283.

<sup>126</sup> Klaus K. Hübler, "Denk-Bilder, bewegt: Eine Annäherung an Brian Ferneyhough," *Zeitschrift für Neue Musik* 18 (1987), 26. ("[Geste] ist zu verstehen als Ab-Bild eines bestimmten emotionalen Zustandes derart, daß der expressive Gehalt in der Geste zu unmittelbarem Ausdruck verlangt. In einer solchem musikalischen Konzeption, wie sie von der Neoromantischen Schule derzeit praktiziert wird, fristet das einzelne Klangzeichen ein monadisches Dasein; je getreuer es Ab-Bild ist, umso weniger bedarf es eines Zusammenhangs, ja es sträubt sich im Zustand des Selbst-Genugseins gegen jede syntaktische Verbindung.") See Ferneyhough, "Form, Figure, Style," 34-35. Compare also Adorno: "All becoming is eliminated, as though it were the contamination of the object itself. The object is now excluded from any intervening treatment; in this position it pretends to have been liberated from all elaboration and to have achieved self-contained monumentality." (*Philosophy of Modern Music*, 201)

<sup>127</sup> Compare Adorno: “What is at present conceivable, indeed necessary, are works that immolate themselves, through their temporal core, sacrificing their own lives to the instant where their truth appears. For them, perishing does not in the least diminish their importance.” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 254)

<sup>128</sup> Hübler, 26. (“In der schrittweisen Entfaltung ihrer Potentialität wächst ihnen so eine Bedeutung und Aura zu, wie sie den Elementen in ihrer Isolation unerreichbar wäre.... Ferneyhoughs Expressivität speist sich also nicht aus dem hic et nunc quasi-existentialistischer Offenbarungen, sondern zeigt sich in der (diskursiven) Bewegung des Werks, in dem nicht so sehr die Zustände von Anfang und Ende von primärer Bedeutung sind als die Moment des „nicht mehr“ und „noch nicht.“) Compare Adorno: “[The fact] that what is first and original is not coterminous with the truth is something that can be said of no sphere of life with greater justification than of that art whose most sublime works virtually legitimate themselves by the fact that their truth does not emerge until the last measure—in Hegel’s words, as a ‘result.’ For music, the nullity of the beginning becomes the motor of its own form.” (“The Relationship of Philosophy and Music,” in *Essays on Music*, 141-42) When Ferneyhough’s music is seen in this light, criticisms such as Roger Marsh’s seem to miss the mark. Marsh argues that the extreme degree of notational specificity in Ferneyhough’s scores exceeds the listener’s ability to perceive significant parametrical gradations: “A proliferation of fine distinctions, however organically derived, are unlikely to contribute significantly in linguistic terms, since the only meaningful oppositions are those which can be clearly perceived as such.” (Roger Marsh, “Heroic Motives,” *The Musical Times* 135, no. 1812 (February, 1994), 85) Marsh cites the linguistic principle of the ‘safety margin’, which posits a sort of critical buffer between various phonemes, such that each can be pronounced in a number of different ways, so long as it remains audibly distinct from its linguistic neighbors. To make this concept relevant to music, Marsh offers the following example: “A simple parallel [to the operation of the ‘safety margin’ in linguistics] might be a waltz, in which the relationship between minim and crotchet in a succession of 3/4 bars might be subjected to considerable variation without sacrificing the essential ‘waltz’ character of the music. On the other hand, if minim-crotchet becomes too close to dotted crotchet-dotted crotchet for more than a few bars, the meaning of the music is completely changed.” (Marsh, 85) This is an unimpeachable claim; the problem, however, arises when Marsh attempts to apply such linguistically-derived concepts to music such as Ferneyhough’s. It is unclear whether Marsh is concerned with the ambiguity in performance between two musical states (in his example, ‘waltz’ and ‘non-waltz’), or with the incongruence between what the score suggests and what is heard. In either case, these criticisms seem rather misplaced: the vagueness they highlight is hardly surprising, given Ferneyhough’s avowed interest in exploring the liminal states of musical experience. The implication that, absent any traditionally-functioning motivic differentiation, this music is doomed to be “of generalized, if often spectacular, effect” and remain “[not] concerned with organic continuity or evolution, except in theoretical terms” is particularly odd. Arguing that Ferneyhough’s music would benefit from a clearer ‘safety margin’ between musical states seems to presuppose the very ‘gestural’ approach to composition which Ferneyhough so vocally disavows. What’s more, the suggestion that Ferneyhough’s music, “adrift on the sea of approximation,” is incapable of significant and audible formal differentiation—whether evolutionary or juxtapositional—runs athwart the audible evidence of so much of Ferneyhough’s music.

<sup>129</sup> See Ferneyhough, *Collected Writings*, 256.

<sup>130</sup> See Helmut Lachenmann, “Open Letter to Hans Werner Henze,” trans. Jeffrey Stadelman, *Perspectives of New Music* 35, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 194.

<sup>131</sup> Christopher Fox, “British Music at Darmstadt 1982-92,” *Tempo* 186 (September, 1993), 22.

<sup>132</sup> Morag J. Grant, “Rihm’s ‘musique informelle,’” *British Postgraduate Musicology* 1 (2002), 2.

<sup>133</sup> Williams, “Adorno and the Semantics of Modernism,” 41.

<sup>134</sup> It is important to note that Adorno acknowledges the impossibility of working with historically “pure” material; as we have seen, this insight forms the basis of his critique of scientism in the postwar avant-garde. The de-historicization of the material, which is characteristic of modern art, itself becomes marked as a historical process. This material is not timeless or pure; it announces its origin in the desire to obliterate origins. “The loss of specific properties—superficially perceived as a loss of the historical dimension of the material—is itself a historical trend in that it is tied up with the subjectification of reason. In other words, this trend leaves its historical characteristic in the material.” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 214)

<sup>135</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 135.

<sup>136</sup> Adorno, “The Relationship of Philosophy and Music,” in *Essays on Music*, 155.

<sup>137</sup> Adorno also compares neo-classicism with twelve-tone technique as regressive developments. See *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 206.

<sup>138</sup> Bürger, “The Decline of Modernism,” 41.

<sup>139</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 53-54.

<sup>140</sup> Rudolf Frisius, "Poträt eines Erfolgreichen," *Westermanns Monatshefte*, 9 September 1985, 81. ("Zunächst schien es so, als wolle er sich immer weiter von der Neuen Musik entfernen, als wolle er Rückwege suchen zu einem direkteren, auch dem Publikum eingängigeren Ausdruck. Dabei ging es ihm aber nicht um idyllische Beschwörung der Vergangenheit. Im Gegenteil: Gerade dort, wo seine Musik Vergangenes zitiert, klingt sie am ehesten verschreckt, verstört, zwiespältig, manchmal sogar fast manisch besessen.")

<sup>141</sup> Williams, "Adorno and the Semantics of Modernism," 36.

<sup>142</sup> Peter Andraschke, "Traditionsmomente in Kompositionen von Cristóbal Halffter, Klaus Huber und Wolfgang Rihm," in *Die neue Musik und die Tradition*, ed. Reinhold Brinkmann (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1978), 139. ("Das Aufgenommene wird nicht epigonenhaft wiederholt. Er erscheint innerlich verarbeitet und zu einer eigenen Schreibweise umgebildet. Denn Rihm greift nicht so sehr auf frühere Kompositionstechniken zurück, sondern auf Ausdrucksqualitäten von Musik, die ihm entsprechen.")

<sup>143</sup> Andraschke, 138.

<sup>144</sup> "Wolfgang Rihm in Conversation with Kirk Noreen and Joshua Cody," <[http://www.sospeso.com/contents/articles/rihm\\_p1.htm](http://www.sospeso.com/contents/articles/rihm_p1.htm)>

<sup>145</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 308.

<sup>146</sup> Thus not only technical and analytical writing, but even program notes are a bothersome chore for Rihm. As Peter Andraschke writes, "[Rihm] aspires in his works for the most extreme clarity of expression and impact. Thus he sees in the requisite elucidations of his own compositions merely an unnecessary duplication of what he already said in the music." (Andraschke, 135: "Er strebt in seinen Werken äußerste Deutlichkeit von Aussage und Wirkung an. Deshalb sieht er in geforderten Erläuterungen zu eigenen Kompositionen nur eine unnötige Verdoppelung dessen, was er bereits in der Musik sagt.") Corroborating this irrationalist tendency in Rihm's thought, Alastair Williams asserts that "at times [Rihm's] aesthetic goes so far as to suggest that music is a medium of primeval intensity that has no truck with the rational forms of society." Alistair Williams, *New Music and the Claims of Modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 137.

<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Stefan Fricke, "Musik ist nie bei sich," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 163, no. 2 (March-April, 2002), 53. ("Ich glaube...dass ich seit Anbeginn auf der Suche nach dem unanalysierbaren Kunstwerk bin.")

<sup>148</sup> See Grant, "Rihm's 'musique informelle'."

<sup>149</sup> Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia*, 272.

<sup>150</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 316.

<sup>151</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 158

<sup>152</sup> Seth Brodsky, "An Emotional Avant-Garde," <<http://www.andante.com/article/article.cfm?id=20106>>

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