

## What Ails Adorno?

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Toomas Siitan

Between 2020 and 2022 two of the most important texts of twentieth-century social critique and modernist music aesthetics were published in Estonian: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1947) and Theodor W. Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music* (*Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 1949), two texts which are related to each other in many respects. It is only since the turn of the millennium that the latter, which had established itself as one of the key texts of twentieth-century modernist musical aesthetics, has begun to be more openly criticised. This article examines the personal and intellectual background to Adorno's philosophy of music, with a particular focus on the role of national ideology and both personal and ethnocultural traumas in the development of musical aesthetics.

Adorno describes his varied experience of marginalisation and exclusion, culminating in his expulsion in 1933 by the Nazi regime and his subsequent exile in *Minima Moralia* (1951). His fate was closely linked to that of Arnold Schoenberg, whose predominantly positive approach to aesthetics is at the heart of *Philosophy of New Music*, as well as to Thomas Mann, for whose novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947) both Schoenberg and Adorno may have served as prototypes for the central characters.

Central to Adorno's musical aesthetics is the idea of progress, which is linked to social processes and rendered unilaterally absolute. Although Adorno's approach to society draws significantly on the legacy of Max Weber, there are striking differences in their understanding of progress in the arts. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Enlightenment's move away from a religious worldview created the soil for the so-called "religion of art" (Wackenroder, Tieck), which became the foundation of German romanticism and, most notably, of its aesthetics of music (E.T.A. Hoffmann). The *Philosophy of New Music* describes the disintegration of the cultural forms originating from the Enlightenment which had taken root in the nineteenth century, and views twentieth-century modernism as a logical continuation of these processes. The critique of mass culture is presented most forcefully in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but the approach to music in Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music* is also ruthlessly elitist. This is also the reason for Adorno's cultural pessimism: he recognises that opposition to society and radical autonomy condemn avant-garde music to communicative isolation and sees no solution to this contradiction.

The article also deals with the national ideological context of the *Philosophy of New Music*. This aspect is not explicitly addressed in Adorno's text and is ambivalent in the case of both Adorno and Schoenberg, but Adorno continues the cultural ideology formed in the traumatic era for Germany of the Napoleonic wars, which considers German music to be superior to others. This ideology is first manifested in Johann Nikolaus Forkel's biography of Bach (1802). From that time on, Bach is regarded as the archetype of the German musical spirit and the starting point of the flowering of German music. Adorno also follows the canonical succession of composers established in the 19th century: Bach-Beethoven-Brahms-Wagner, without, however, being able convincingly conceive its logical continuation in Schoenberg's oeuvre.

During the first half of the nineteenth century German cultural ideology was dominated by a spirit of patriotism, and prominent musicians of Jewish origin such as Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Adolf Bernhard Marx were among those who helped shape it. However, the subsequent historical traumas – the wave of revolutions in 1848 and the First World War – radically changed this ideology. The transformation of German patriotism into nationalism is most clearly manifest in Richard Wagner's anti-Semitic "Das Judentum in der Musik" (1850/1869), and the nationalistic spirit intensified after the First World War, which ended most painfully for Germany. The debate about the modernist style that arose in Germany around 1920, in which the conservative trend was represented by the composer Hans Pfitzner, also took on a national political tone: Pfitzner considered both the "international" atonal trend and the influence of American jazz as threats to the German musical tradition (John 1994: 176). These attitudes prepared the ground for the extreme politicisation of German cultural life under the

National Socialist regime. However, in the view of the opponents of Pfitzner's conservative tendency, as well as of Schoenberg himself (Rufé 1959: 26), it was the twelve-tone technique that continued the best traditions of German music and guaranteed its continued supremacy.

The publication of Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music* after the Second World War coincided with the beginning of the heyday of avant-garde music, especially in those countries that had experienced totalitarian regimes – West Germany and Italy. At the same time an aesthetics that in Nazi Germany had been associated with the left, and even with Bolshevism, was subject to repression in the countries of the Eastern Bloc.

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