

## Theodor W. Adorno's Radio Theory: An Interpretation from the Estonian Perspective of the 1920s and 1930s

Aare Tool

Theodor W. Adorno's (1903–1969) articles on radio broadcasting from 1938–1941, published in a compilation entitled *Current of Music* (2009), form a significant part of his voluminous writings on music. In these articles ("Radio Physiognomics", "A Social Critique of Radio Music", etc.), Adorno analysed the specific mode of listening fostered by radio broadcasts during their early days, while remaining critical of the widespread presumptions about radio's potential to provide musical "enlightenment" to unprecedentedly large audiences. Although Adorno's analysis is focused on American radio stations, Estonian sources from the 1920s and 1930s bear witness to a similar view of the hopes and attitudes that defined radio's early public reception. Very much in line with the claims that Adorno scrutinises in his writings, radio was considered in Estonia as a means of improving the audience's musical taste, while helping to overcome social divides (urban vs rural regions, elite vs accessible forms of culture, etc.).

In this article, radio listening is analysed as a cultural practice in Estonia in the 1920s and 1930s, with a special emphasis on the years immediately following the beginning of regular radio broadcasts in Tallinn on 18th December 1926. The primary sources for this study include articles and advertisements for radio receivers published in Estonian periodicals, while the correspondence between the Estonian literary figures Johannes Semper and Johannes Barbarus serves as an illustration of the late-1920s fascination with what was then widely described as the most wonderful technical invention of the century.

Adorno's criticism of radio, as expressed in its most concise form in the article "A Social Critique of Radio Music", focuses on four major aspects: commodity listening, the standardisation of radio programmes (one of Adorno's stances that can be challenged from a European perspective), radio's effect upon social consciousness, and radio's failure to promote progress in music itself and in listening habits (Adorno 2009: 137–138). In one of the most extensive of Adorno's radio-related articles, "Radio Physiognomics", radio is described as susceptible to personification:

Radio "speaks to us" even when we are not listening to a speaker. It might grimace; it might shock us; it might even "raise its eyes" at the very moment we suddenly realize that the inarticulate sounds pouring from the loudspeaker are taking the shape of a piece of music which particularly touches us (Adorno 2009: 44).

The sense of closeness, intimacy and authority invoked by the "radio voice" increases the threat of radio's misuse for political propaganda. In Chapter 2, examples from articles published in Estonian periodicals help to illustrate several of the above-mentioned aspects that Adorno criticised in his radio theory.

In Estonia, radio broadcasts were operated initially by the private-sector company Raadio Ringhääling (Radio Broadcasting Corporation), which in 1934 became the national broadcasting company Riigi Ringhääling (State Broadcasting Corporation). Broadcasts of live music and gramophone recordings formed a major part of the programming of Raadio Ringhääling and included, most notably, opera and operetta broadcasts from the Estonia theatre. For many listeners, however, their precious radio receiver was a gateway to the music available on foreign stations, as described by Semper in a bout of enthusiasm (Chapter 3.2): "I have already spotted forty stations, and so many are still waiting ahead. [...] Every day, I find myself listening to modern music, Stravinsky, Honegger, Hindemith, and dozens of others" (EEE 2020: 505).

The Estonian State Broadcasting Corporation emphasised the role of radio as a socially responsible educator and democratic promoter of "great music" in just the same way as their European and American counterparts. The role of radio broadcasts in remote areas, a problem widely discussed in the USA, was no less pertinent in Estonia, where, in the 1930s, the rural population still predominated.

Radio was widely described as the most democratic of all the great inventions as it was accessible and easy to use for everybody. Nevertheless, the early years of radio broadcasting were marked by a delicate balance between outspoken idealism and commercially determined realities.

Apart from posing the questions of what “great” music is and whether early radio, for all its technical deficiencies, was able to do it justice, Adorno’s *Current of Music* is primarily an attempt to reflect on the great expectations and optimism that surrounded radio’s public image. Many of these expectations can be exemplified also from an Estonian perspective. Adorno’s *Current of Music*, a polemical view with regard to the prevailing technological optimism, thus presents an antithesis crucial for understanding the cultural and political implications of radio broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s.