

Theodor Adorno, translated by Rodney Livingstone, *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music* (London: Verso 1992).

Few philosophers have written both extensively and profoundly on music. The dry whisperings of the analytic school, like murmurs in the loge during a concert, have served mainly to annoy rather than inform. The great metaphysicians, with the resonant exception of Schopenhauer, seldom gave much space in their writings to music, generally preferring to discuss poetry or painting. The empiricists noted the fact of music, as indeed of art altogether, only to dismiss any questions of depth or value as matters of personal taste, beyond the confines of true philosophy.

Among those few philosophers who devoted much thought to music none stands more visibly than Theodor Adorno. *Quasi Una Fantasia* is an ideal introduction to his musical thought; unlike many of his other writings, it is neither convoluted nor extremely difficult for the general reader to comprehend. Originally published in 1963, and here translated into English for the first time, the book consists of fourteen sections, from a wide-ranging collection of short aphorisms to extended discussions of single composers such as Mahler, Zemlinsky, and Berg (with whom Adorno studied). Always, Adorno's opinions are forceful: "The task of theory," as he sees it, "is always to take sides in unresolved disputes, not to slip into what has always been the disreputable role of the messenger who brings the latest news."(145)

All valuable theory is rooted in a system, whether implicit or explicit. Adorno's stems from his own version of Marxism; although Marx's name does not appear in the index at all, Marx's thought consistently shapes the writings. It is no doctrinaire Marxism, though; Adorno's divagations from the orthodox Marxist path are in themselves fascinating. Adorno views music through the lens of Marxism, but the lens itself is shaped by a philosophy with solid roots in the best of the German cultural tradition. The Marxism serves to add fire to Adorno's scorn for the pallid products of "the musical roast-chicken culture."(201)

Composers respond to the world in which they live and the music which they know: “The new music may well be understood as the effort to do justice to all that the sharpened ear of the composer finds unresolved or antinomial in traditional music.”(262) Modern music — that is, the music of the second Viennese School and beyond — is self-conscious of this attempt; its differences from its epochal predecessors are not simply ones of sound but of attitude as well. Composers knowingly choose a sound, a structure, a style, often varying from work to work, in an effort to escape from, or be subsumed within, the relentless forces of what Adorno consistently refers to as “the culture industry.” Hence the intellectual structures developed by, for example, Schoenberg and Stockhausen. Only by an enormous act of creative will could they defend themselves from the sterile mass culture that was, and is, reducing even the greatest of previous works to desiccated and predictable ornaments for reactionary amusement: “The substance of the new music is determined to a certain extent by its hostility towards the administered society.”(263)

True music, true art of all sorts, exists to defy the existing order, to point toward something better. Great music, however dark in mood or sound, is inherently optimistic:

Ever since music has existed, it has always been a protest, however ineffectual, against myth, against a fate which was always the same, and even against death ... However feeble its guarantee that there is an alternative, music never abjures its promise that one exists. Freedom is an intrinsic necessity for music.(151)

This freedom manifests itself in the development of the musical work through time: “music is bound to the fact of succession and is hence as irreversible as time itself. By starting it commits itself to carrying on, to becoming something new, to developing.”(150-1) Thus that which seeks to deny the temporal nature of music, either through complex but static structures such as found in Stravinsky (and presumably, by extension, such as found in contemporary minimalists such as Glass and Adams), or through the repetitive banalities found in popular music of all sorts, is to be condemned

as an attempt on the part of the composer to use autonomy to deny freedom.

However much Adorno recognized the optimism inherent in music, he also recognized the forces arrayed against the promise of that optimism. The power of the culture industry to corrupt and crush the spirit of both creators and listeners is colossal. The original artist is silenced and the sensitive listener aurally tortured into a patterned response with a perfection of technique of awesome proportions: "For people to be transformed into insects they require as much energy as might well suffice to transform them into human beings."(52)

"Important works of art are the ones that aim for an extreme; they are destroyed in the process and their broken outlines survive as the ciphers of a supreme, unnameable truth."(226) No great work can be summed up in one compact statement or a single experience. Each contains some element forcing the individual, to the extent that they come to grips with the work at all, to recreate it, and themselves, anew. This demands human freedom, a freedom which in turn requires the negation of what the person was before, requires that they become someone new, someone more fully human, capable of greater and deeper interactions and discoveries. When no such significant interactions can occur with a given work, that work is dead. When no such interactions can occur within a given person, that person may as well be dead. It is this latter state toward which the culture industry, driven by its own remorseless internal strictures, is tending, a state in which persons, having been stripped of their humanity, require ever greater stimuli to pretend to life. In an utterly predictable world of well-trained consumers, the stimuli will happily be provided by the cultural corporations: "The products of the American pop music industry shed some light on this abyss. The sheer idiocy of a mass product created especially for you assumes the character of a ghastly necessity."(44)

The commodification of music is but one symptom of the commodification of humanity against which Adorno is taking a stand. His writings on music seek to revivify, or awaken, individual concern and involvement. No reader will agree with all of Adorno's

claims, nor should they. Rather they should approach these valuable and provocative writings as allies in a fight to save what is best in music, and in ourselves, from a process which, afraid of the potential of human freedom, seeks to debase and destroy it. The culture industry subsists on acquiescence; the inherent promise of great music is that, through the committed exercise of human freedom, it can be overcome, even if only briefly for each of us. Adorno's is an honorable effort on behalf of that freedom, and the greater world toward which it beckons.

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Paola A. Sensi-Isolani and Phylis Cancilla Martinelli, eds., *Struggle and Success: An Anthology of the Italian Immigrant Experience in California* (New York: Center for Migration Studies 1993).

In *Struggle and Success: An Anthology of the Italian Immigrant Experience in California*, editors Paola A. Sensi-Isolani and Phylis Cancilla Martinelli have added some breadth to what has been a fairly narrow topic. The study of Italians in California has been the subject of very few monographs, and they have almost exclusively been focused on the urban immigrant experience.¹ *Struggle and Success*' multi-disciplinary construction has expanded the parameters to include rural Italian Americans, but not at the expense of their urban brethren, and therefore allows the reader to compare and contrast these two distinct groups. Furthermore, *Struggle and Success* contains a variety of cultural, economic, and political

1 See George Ponzetta, "Immigrants and Ethnics: The State of Italian-American Historiography," *Journal of American Ethnic History* Vol. 9, 1 (Fall, 1989), 67-95.