

Elements of a Radio Theory: Adorno and the Princeton Radio Research Project

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Fresh scholarship and new translations have finally begun to transform the longstanding misreadings of Theodor Adorno in Anglo-American musicology and music history.¹ This is particularly urgent for Adorno's position on popular culture, which—most often presented in the context of the polemical exchanges with Walter Benjamin—has generally been characterized as a myopic mandarinism blind to the utopian and progressive dimensions of mass media such as film. This black-and-white juxtaposition of Adorno and Benjamin, while perhaps valuable as a reductive pedagogical device for presenting a historical debate on aesthetics and politics, depends in large measure on somewhat hasty readings of Adorno's essays on popular music and jazz² and of the 1938 study "On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening,"³ which simply reduce the often problematic analyses to variations of the "culture industry critique" articulated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. However, Adorno's serious interest in questions of popular culture and technology is not only much more complex than has previously been acknowledged, but also dates back to the beginnings of his simultaneous involvement with music and cultural criticism.

It is in the context of Adorno's often overlooked role in the publication of the *Musikblätter des Anbruch*, an avant-garde music journal founded in Vienna in 1919 as one of two house periodicals of the music publisher Universal Edition,⁴ that one can find the foundations of his work on the relationship of music, popular culture, and technology. Adorno began contributing to the *Musikblätter* in 1925, having been introduced, one surmises, by the composer Alban Berg, his teacher at the time and the first of the journal's many editors.⁵ In 1929, after years as a regular contributor,⁶ Adorno was invited to join the journal's editorial board, taking his place beside the two other longtime editors, Paul Stefan, a music journalist, and Hans

Heinsheimer, the representative of Universal Edition.⁷ Adorno immediately proposed a radical reorganization of the journal starting with the title, which was shortened from *Musikblätter des Anbruch* to simply *Anbruch* (since the expressionist literary publication to which it had originally been linked had since ceased to exist). Fortunately, Adorno laid out his new agenda for the *Anbruch*—effectively, a full frontal attack on what he considered to be reactionary forces in the music world—in a pair of programmatic tracts.⁸

Among the many changes Adorno proposed for the *Anbruch* was an adamant call to broaden its scope to include a focus on “light music” (*leichte Musik*) and kitsch. Anticipating elements of the “culture industry critique” developed together with Max Horkheimer years later, Adorno asserted here that “light music” and kitsch are by no means the “collective” art that they claim to be but rather an ideological surrogate structured by specific class interests. In strictly musical terms, kitsch is not at all modern, he argued, but reactionary. However, this did not lead Adorno to dismiss it. On the contrary, he insisted unequivocally on the redemption (*Rettung*) of kitsch as an object “of the greatest importance.” The *Anbruch*, he suggested, ought to have a special issue and a regular column on the subject.⁹ In both, “light music” and kitsch must be defended against those who would simply dismiss it and at the same time criticized to counter those who would simply champion it. As Adorno puts it:

In conjunction with sociological analyses there is also an entire field of music—previously denied any serious study whatsoever—which ought to be incorporated into the domain of the *Anbruch*; namely, the entire realm of “light music,” of kitsch, not only jazz but also the European operetta, the hit tune, etc. In doing so, one ought to adopt a very particular kind of approach that ought to be circumscribed in two senses. On the one hand, one must abandon the arrogance characteristic of an understanding of “serious” music which believes it can completely ignore the music which today constitutes the only musical material consumed by the vast majority of all people. Kitsch must be played out and defended against everything that is merely elevated mediocre art, against the now rotten ideals of personality, culture, etc. On the other hand, however, one must not fall prey to the tendency—all too fashionable these days, above all in Berlin—to simply glorify kitsch and consider it the true art of the epoch merely because of its popularity.¹⁰

Here Adorno is effectively calling for a reading of kitsch—and indeed of all mass culture—that is sensitive to both its reified and its utopian dimensions.

In a similar vein, Adorno also maintained that the new *Anbruch* ought to undertake a critical reconsideration of the wide range of technologies currently being employed in the production of both “light” and “serious” music. To this end, he proposed a new column, entitled “Mechanische Musik,” to be devoted exclusively to questions concerning music and machines. Such a column had in fact already been inaugurated in the *Musikblätter* years earlier by the music critic Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt but had fallen into neglect. According to Adorno, this was because Stuckenschmidt had made the mistake of orienting the column toward the *producers* of mechanical music—the record industry, the gramophone manufacturers, and others—in hopes of attracting revenue from advertising. However, since the industry had its own journals, the *Anbruch* was hardly appealing as a propaganda vehicle, and the anticipated advertising did not materialize. Instead, Adorno conceived the column—now under the direction of Frank Warschauer—as a critical and pedagogical forum directed toward the *consumers*, providing them with both technical advice and musicologically knowledgeable criticism of work produced for various new media. Indeed, as is evident from Adorno’s unpublished memorandum on the new editorial direction of the journal, the scope of the new column was to be very comprehensive: “The section on mechanical music cannot have a one-sided focus only on record criticism. Instead, it must also address problems concerning radio and possibly even provide regular reviews of the most important broadcasts of modern music (here too, critique!). Finally it must also discuss all the musical problems of the cinema, that is, both the older forms of film music as well as the newer problems of the sound film.”¹¹

In the later version of his programmatic sketch for the revitalization of the *Anbruch* Adorno articulated the sociophilosophical imperatives that motivated this call for a regular focus on the relationship between music and technology. “The purpose of the [column] on mechanical [music],” he writes,

is not merely to trace journalistically a conspicuous trend in current musical life. Rather, it will attempt to shed light on the very meaning of mechanization, will weigh the different tendencies of mechanization against each other and will try to have an influence on the politics of programming [for these mechanical media]. All this grows out of the conviction that the mechanical presentation of music today is of contemporary relevance in a deeper sense than merely being currently available as a new technological means. To put it another way, this position arises out of the conviction that the availability of means



Fans of the NBC *Music Appreciation Hour* could receive autographed pictures of Walter Damrosch

corresponds to an availability of consciousness and that the current historical state of the [art] works themselves to a large extent requires them to be presented mechanically.¹²

In light of this insistence on the importance of technology as an issue for contemporary musical practice of all kinds, it is not entirely surprising that besides a number of texts on the gramophone,¹³ Adorno also wrote extensively about and for another highly influential musical technology: radio.

Adorno's analytical and critical study of Walter Damrosch's *Music Appreciation Hour*, a highly popular pedagogical radio program for children broadcast weekly by NBC from 1928 to 1942,¹⁴ is one of four studies Adorno wrote in English between 1938 and 1941 under the aegis of the Princeton Radio Research Project. Directed by the sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld out of his Research Center of the University of

Newark, the Radio Research Project was funded by a multi-year grant from the Rockefeller Foundation in order to establish, according to the project's official title, "The Essential Value of Radio to All Types of Listeners." Indeed, it was the offer of a half-time position as director of the project's music division, together with another half-time position organized by Max Horkheimer at the Institute for Social Research, affiliated with Columbia University, that brought Adorno to the United States in 1938. Adorno's participation was envisioned as a fertile encounter of continental critical social theory (as evidenced, for example, in Adorno's important 1932 essay "On the Social Situation of Music"¹⁵) with the empirical research methods of American sociology. As Lazarsfeld formulated it in a letter to Adorno on 29 November 1937:

Dear Dr. Wiesengrund: During these last few days I have discussed with my associates what we are expecting from your future work with us. Let me give you a brief idea so that we might start some correspondence about it even before you come to this country. . . . I intend to make the musical section, so to speak, the hunting ground for the "European approach." By that I mean two things: A more theoretical attitude toward the research problem, and a more pessimistic attitude toward an instrument of technical progress.

It is especially the first point to which I should like to draw your attention. Our project definitely deals with empirical research. But I am convinced, the same as you are, that fact-finding can be extremely improved by extensive preliminary theoretical thinking. Taking, for instance, the papers you wrote in the Institute's magazine, I might put the situation in the following terms: It is exactly this kind of thing which we shall expect from you, but it has to be driven two steps further:

- (1) Toward an empirical research problem.
- (2) Toward an actual execution of the field work. . . .

I purposely refrain from giving you any of the concrete problems and ideas which I, myself, have in the field of radio and music because I think it will be more advantageous for us to get your thinking quite fresh and uninfluenced by us.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, Adorno's initial reaction to the Princeton Radio Research Project was one of profound alienation. The utter incompatibility of the project's empirical focus with Adorno's model of the aesthetic sphere initially seemed to present an epistemological impasse. As Adorno put it: "When I was confronted with the demand to 'measure culture,' I reflected that culture might be precisely that condition that excludes a mentality capable of measuring it."¹⁷ Adorno's central

contribution to the project was, understandably, a rather theoretical lecture presented in 1939 to the research staff and entitled “A Social Critique of Radio Music.”¹⁸ Having laid out his basic theoretical framework here in the form of theses, Adorno’s subsequent work increasingly attempted to come to grips with the project’s empirical mandate. His duties, which included studies of listener-mail at radio stations as well as (rather controversial) interviews with radio personnel and musicians, were greatly facilitated by his “assistant,” George Simpson, a translator of Durkheim and a sociologist thoroughly versed in both continental and American sociological theory who played a crucial role in mediating between Adorno and the positivist idiom that reigned at the project. Indeed, the remaining three treatises which Adorno wrote (in collaboration with Simpson) during his affiliation with Lazarsfeld’s institute were all more or less “concrete” radio research analyses: “On Popular Music,” “The Radio Symphony,” and a study of the NBC *Music Appreciation Hour*.¹⁹

The study of the NBC radio program was the longest of the four texts produced for the Radio Research Project and the only one which remained unpublished, “unfortunately,” as Adorno put it later, since parts of it were now somewhat outdated. The text’s focus, according to Adorno, “had to do with critical content analysis, with simply and strictly demonstrating that the ‘Damrosch Hour,’ highly regarded and widely listened to as a non-commercial contribution promoting musical culture, was propagating false information about music as well as a deceptive and untrue conception of it. The social bases of such inaccuracy were sought in conformity to the views of those who were responsible for this ‘appreciation hour.’”²⁰ Together with the three other “fragmentary” texts that grew out of his tenure at the project, Adorno considered the NBC study as an attempt, ultimately unsuccessful, to elaborate “a systematically executed sociology and social psychology of radio music.”²¹ Together, these texts form part of an unfinished book-length study of radio Adorno had planned to write for Oxford University Press. This book, entitled *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, will be published in its fragmentary form as one of Adorno’s *Nachgelassene Schriften*, edited by the Adorno Archive in Frankfurt, the first volume of which is *Beethoven, Philosophie der Musik* (reviewed here by Colin Sample). Following his return to Germany in the 1950s, Adorno incorporated sections of the study of the *Music Appreciation Hour* into a radio lecture broadcast by the Süddeutsche Rundfunk in October 1961 under the title “Die gewürdigte Musik” [Appreciated music].²² The English-language text published below is Adorno’s unedited original typescript, which was

found, complete with handwritten emendations, among the Lazarsfeld papers in the archives of Columbia University.

Notes

1. For an example of such new scholarship, see Michael P. Steinberg, "The Musical Absolute," *New German Critique* 56 (1992): 17–42; new Adorno texts in English include Susan Gillespie's translation of "Music, Language, and Composition," *Musical Quarterly* 77 (1993): 401–14.
2. Besides "On Popular Music," written with George Simpson, *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941): 17–48, and "Perennial Fashion—Jazz," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967): 119–32, there are a number of other texts by Adorno on the subject that are available in English. These include a review of Wilder Hobson's *American Jazz Music* and Winthrop Sargent's *Jazz Hot and Hybrid* in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941): 167–78; an entry on jazz in Dagobert D. Runes and Harry G. Schrickel, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Arts* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 511–13; and more recently, "On Jazz," trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, *Discourse* 12:1 (1989–90): 45–69. Here, too, recent readings have recognized that the object of Adorno's critique is not jazz per se but rather a very specific moment in its history as represented by music such as that of Paul Whiteman (see Wolfgang Sandner, "Populärmusik als somatisches Stimulans: Adornos Kritik der 'leichten Musik,'" in Otto Kolleritsch, ed., *Adorno und die Musik* [Graz: Institut für Wertungsforschung, 1979], 125–32). While Adorno's failure to differentiate here is highly problematic given the sophistication of his analyses of other musical genres and periods, it by no means justifies a wholesale rejection of the work. As Bernard Gendron notes in an article entitled "Theodor Adorno meets the Cadillacs," in Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 18–36: "Despite its failures and excesses, Adorno's 1941 essay 'On Popular Music' remains in my opinion one of the two or three most penetrating pieces on the subject; it addresses many important questions which are often neglected by those who tend to dismiss Adorno's work" (19).
3. This essay in particular, available in translation in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Urizon Books, 1978), 270–99, must be understood, so Adorno insisted, as a response to Benjamin's "Artwork" essay (see Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," in Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn, eds., *The Intellectual Migration* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969], 342, and the preface to *Dissonanzen*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975], 14:10). Most commentators fail to recognize that as such it was written as a polemical "corrective" to what Adorno perceived as Benjamin's "all too unmediatedly redemptive" arguments. If it is overstated, then that is due in large part to this specific rhetorical necessity. For a nuanced reading of Benjamin's "Artwork" essay, see Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" *New German Critique* 40 (1987): 179–224.
4. The other journal, *Pult und Taktstock: Fachzeitschrift für Dirigenten*, was aimed primarily at conductors. Adorno published here as well, submitting essays in the mid-1920s on Béla Bartók and Arnold Schönberg, as well as on questions of interpretation; see, e.g., *Musikalische Schriften V–VI*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf

Tiedemann and Klaus Schultz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), 18:279–81, 324–27, and 335–44; and 19:440–47.

5. Adorno's all too little known work as a composer is available in two volumes edited by Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn: *Kompositionen*, vol. 1, *Piano Song Cycles*; vol. 2, *Chamber Music, Choral and Orchestral Works* (München: Verlag Edition Text und Kritik, 1980). The complete musical oeuvre was performed at a gala concert entitled "Theodor W. Adorno: Der Philosoph als Komponist" in Frankfurt on 17 September 1988 as part of a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (9 November 1938). The program also included the world premiere of two songs with orchestra from Adorno's unfinished *Singspiel* based on Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, written November 1932–August 1933; see Adorno, *Der Schatz der Indianer-Joe: Singspiel nach Mark Twain*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979). Adorno's complete compositional works are available on a Wergo CD (#6173–2). With the exception of an early essay by René Leibowitz ("Der Komponist Theodor W. Adorno," in *Zeugnisse: Theodor W. Adorno zum sechzigsten Geburtstag* [Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1963], 355–59), studies of this dimension of Adorno's creative output have begun to appear only recently. These include Dieter Schnebel, "Einführung in Adornos Musik," in Kolleritsch, 15–19; Rolf Tiedemann, ed., *Adorno-Noten* (Berlin: Galerie Wewerka, 1984); Siegfried Schibli, *Der Komponist Theodor W. Adorno* (Frankfurt: Frankfurter Bund für Volksbildung, 1988); and Schibli, "Theodor W. Adorno, der Komponist," *Musik-Konzepte* 63/64 (1989).

6. Well over two dozen of the articles Adorno published in the *Musikblätter des Anbruch*—including a series of musical aphorisms; articles on Gustav Mahler, Béla Bartók, Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg, Anton Webern, Hanns Eisler, twelve-tone technique, the new Brahms edition, and hit tunes; and a study of the concert audience—are reprinted in vols. 18 and 19 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*; precise bibliographic information can be found in *Gesammelte Schriften* 19:641–54.

7. For a more detailed discussion of these two figures and the power politics surrounding the editorial board of the *Musikblätter* see Heinz Steinert, *Adorno in Wien: Über die (Un-)möglichkeit von Kunst, Kultur und Befreiung* (Wien: Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1989), 133ff.

8. The first of these texts, "Zum *Anbruch*: Exposé," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 19:601–2, is dated 1928 and was unpublished. The second text, "Zum Jahrgang 1929 des *Anbruch*," first appeared as the unsigned lead article in *Anbruch* 11 (1929): lff, and was also reprinted in the *feuilleton* of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 25 Jan. 1929, 1. Morgenblatt, 1–2. It can be found in *Gesammelte Schriften* 19:605–8.

9. The third issue of *Anbruch* published following Adorno's official appearance on the editorial board in 1929 was in fact entirely devoted to the subject of "light music," with essays by Ernst Bloch, Ernst Krenek, and Kurt Weill. Adorno contributed a text analyzing three popular hit tunes ("Schlageranalysen," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 18:778–87). Missing from the issue—and probably never written—was an essay on "Musik als Hintergrund" [Music as background], which had been proposed by Siegfried Kracauer, one of the nonspecialist contributors Adorno had recommended for the revamped journal (see *Gesammelte Schriften* 19:604).

10. "Zum *Anbruch*: Exposé," 601–2; translation mine. For a slightly later version of Adorno's position on kitsch, see the unpublished essay "Kitsch," written c. 1932 (in *Gesammelte Schriften* 18:791–94).

11. "Zum Anbruch: Exposé," 601.
12. "Zum Jahrgang 1929 des Anbruch," 607.
13. See, e.g., the 1928 essay "The Curves of the Needle" and the 1934 text "The Form of the Phonographic Record," trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 49–61.
14. On Damrosch and the *Music Appreciation Hour*, see George Martin, *The Damrosch Dynasty: America's First Family of Music* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), esp. ch. 30. A partial transcript of the first broadcast of Series A of the *Music Appreciation Hour* (heard on stations WEAJ and WJZ in New York City on 9 Oct. 1931) can be found in Cline M. Koon, *The Art of Teaching by Radio*, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Office of Education, Bulletin no. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), 21–23. A complete set of broadcast scripts is housed with the Damrosch papers at the music division of the New York Public Library. A recording of a complete broadcast from 17 May 1938 can be heard at the Museum of Broadcasting in New York City.
15. "On the Social Situation of Music," trans. Wes Blomster, *Telos* 35 (1975): 128–64. The 1932 article appears in the collected writings under the title "Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 18:729–77.
16. Cited in Rolf Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule: Geschichte, theoretische Entwicklung, politische Bedeutung* (München: Carl Hanser, 1986), 267.
17. Theodor W. Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," 347. On Lazarsfeld and the Radio Research Project, see Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "An Episode in the History of Social Research: A Memoir," in Fleming and Bailyn, 270–337, esp. 304ff, as well as David E. Morrison, "Kultur and Culture: The Case of Theodor W. Adorno and Paul F. Lazarsfeld," *Social Research* 43:2 (1978): 331–55, and "The Beginning of Modern Mass Communication Research," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 19:1 (1978): 347–59.
18. This lecture only appeared in print years later as "A Social Critique of Radio Music," *Kenyon Review* 7 (1945): 208–17.
19. "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941): 17–48; "The Radio Symphony, An Experiment in Theory," in Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton, eds., *Radio Research* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941), 110–39.
20. Adorno, "Scientific Experiences," 351.
21. Adorno, "Scientific Experiences," 352.
22. This radio broadcast was subsequently published under the same title in Adorno's *Der getreue Korrepetitor* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1963), 13–38; and then reprinted, along with revisions that Adorno had made in his copy of the book, in *Gesammelte Schriften* 15:163–87.