Theodor W. Adorno is unique among the first generation of the Frankfurt School for his intensive focus on music and the problem of its interpretation. But what is the significance of this focus for his approach to critical theory as a philosopher and sociologist? I argue that it was his experience of music as a fundamentally interpretive and self-reflective art that became the point of reference for his conception of a critical philosophy as interpretation. I also propose that his notion of “autonomous” art music as a non-propositional, non-conceptual mode of critical reflection can only make sense when understood dialectically in relation to the contradictions of music’s social situation.

**Music, Composition, Philosophy**

As a writer Adorno was prolific, and nearly half the twenty volumes that make up his Gesammelte Schriften (GS12–19, and parts of GS10 and GS20) are directly occupied with music, while frequent references are scattered across his other writings. In addition, there are also uncompleted musical projects from Adorno’s Nachlass that have either been edited and published since his death in 1969 (including Beethoven: *Philosophie der Musik* and *Zu einer Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion*, both of which exist only as fragmentary notes and drafts), or are still in the process of being issued. Adorno also sought to reach a wider public as a music critic and was quick to embrace the media, giving talks on music on the radio as early as 1930 during the period of the Weimar Republic and then in West Germany in the post-war years following his return from exile in the United States, when he also often took part in television discussions on music and the arts. The greater part of his writings on music, both from the Gesammelte Schriften and from the Nachlass (which also includes transcripts of academic lecture series as well as radio talks), has now been translated, especially into English. As a result, his work in this area has become widely read and highly influential internationally. At the same time, it remains contentious, particularly within academic musicology and philosophy, in spite of the broader interest it continues to arouse.

There are some frequently encountered misunderstandings about the standing of the writings on music within the totality of Adorno’s work. Three of these seem to me to be particularly dominant. One is that Adorno was an important philosopher, sociologist, and indeed a psychologist, but the writings on music are just the product of a private passion or hobby, and therefore can be safely ignored, because the really significant work lies elsewhere in his voluminous output. Another version of this misunderstanding is that, as well as being a philosopher and sociologist, Adorno was a musicologist, and that the writings on music
belong to the discipline of musicology. In both cases the view is the same: the writings on music can safely be left to the specialists. Another misunderstanding is that as a critical theorist Adorno applied his already worked out cultural theory to many different things, one of which was music – and in particular popular music seen as part of Adorno’s critique of mass culture and the culture industry. In what follows, I propose that music was not simply a sideline for Adorno, but that the writings on music are central to his work, that Adorno was decidedly not a musicologist, and that the writings on popular music are perhaps the least important and least convincing part of his output, and accordingly do not play a key role in my account here – I have in fact addressed Adorno’s critique of popular music at some length elsewhere (see Addison, 1982, 201–218). It is my view that Adorno’s practical experience of music played a decisive role in the shaping of his unique and idiosyncratic version of critical theory. I want to start by focusing on the musical context of Adorno’s thinking and his activity as a composer.

Adorno in a Musical Context

Adorno wrote on music as a philosopher and social theorist, but one informed by a practical and professional musical education at a level rare among philosophers. Above all, he wrote as a composer. He never regarded his writings on music as musicology, and indeed musicology as a discipline has frequently been suspicious or dismissive of Adorno’s approach to music, particularly because of its social and political implications. It is ironic therefore that since Adorno’s death in 1969 musicology has been happy to lay claim to his thinking on music in order to lend the discipline a broader cultural and sociological credibility. In a radio discussion in 1970, the musicologist and aesthete Carl Dahlhaus commented wryly,

If musicology in recent years has wanted to claim some prestige in literary intellectual circles, then it is indebted in no small part to Adorno, who in the outside world has been counted as a musicologist, although he was at one with [the musicologists] at least to the extent that he insisted that he was not one of them.

(Dahlhaus, Finscher, Kaiser, 1971, 439, my trans.)

Adorno saw himself rather as a musician and, in particular, as a composer who was also a philosopher. The extent to which his experience of music shaped his philosophy, and the extent to which he understood music as a mode of philosophizing without concepts (as Schopenhauer had also conceived it), becomes clear once we see how closely music and philosophy are entwined in his thinking. For Adorno, artistic creation held the promise of utopian freedom that was now at odds with what he called the “totally administered world,” and his own period of activity as a composer, which lasted from his teenage years up to the mid-1940s, should be seen in this light, because it informs not only the writings on music but also his work overall as a philosopher and sociologist.

Adorno as Composer

As is well known, Adorno came from a highly musical background. He had an early musical training as pianist (he studied piano with Eduard Jung at the Frankfurt Hoch Conservatory, and subsequently went on to study with Eduard Steuermann, who had given many first performances of music by Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School), while as a composer he studied in Frankfurt with Bernhard Sekles (the Director of the Hoch Conservatory and Paul Hindemith’s teacher), and then privately in Vienna with Alban Berg (see Müller-Doom, 2005, 38–39, 82–94). The period he spent as a pupil of Berg immediately
following the completion of his philosophy doctorate at Frankfurt University was undoubtedly formative, and although he remains a minor figure as a composer, especially when seen in the larger context of the enormous influence exercised on twentieth-century music by the Second Viennese School, Adorno's small compositional output does nevertheless have credibility in its own right. The scores of a selection of his works edited by Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn have been published in two volumes (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1980), including songs, chamber music, choral music, and orchestral works, most notably the Six Short Pieces for Orchestra op.4 (1924–1929), which in 1968 he revised for publication by Ricordi of Milan. There are also a number of other pieces in the Adorno Archiv still to be published, some of them juvenilia dating from his youth, including works for string quartet and also for piano solo.

A number of Adorno’s pieces have now been performed and recorded, including the Two Pieces for String Quartet op.2 with the Buchberger String Quartet, and the Six Short Pieces for Orchestra op.4 played by the Frankfurt Opera Orchestra under Gary Bertini (CD: Wergo, 1990), while the Leipzig String Quartet have recorded two very early works from his teenage years, Six Studies for String Quartet of 1920, and also a rather unconvincing four-movement String Quartet of 1921 that shows a distinct influence of Bartók’s First String Quartet but is overextended (CD: CPO, 1996). It is immediately apparent, however, that his most successful pieces overwhelmingly invoke the pre-1914 freely atonal period of Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg that Adorno admired so much, rather than the music these composers were actually writing by the mid-1920s when he first became actively involved with their circle. This is strongly evident when the pieces written by Adorno in the 1920s are juxtaposed in performance with freely atonal pieces by Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. This was demonstrated very effectively by the pianist María Luisa López Vita in an illuminating recital given in 1999 in Munich entitled “Adornos Kompositionen für Klavier allein im Kontext der Zweiten Wiener Schule”, supported by the Adorno Archiv (Prinzregententheater, 22.11.1999, recording in the Theodor W. Adorno Archiv, made available courtesy of Rolf Tiedemann, who also published an extended programme note: “Adorno, Philosoph und Komponist” for the occasion). Adorno’s Three Piano Pieces (1924) were sandwiched between Berg’s Piano Sonata op.1 (1908–1910) and Schoenberg’s Six Little Piano Pieces op.19 (1913), and followed by other piano works by Adorno like the Three Piano Pieces (1927–1945). The affinities are remarkable, with the harmonic world of the Adorno pieces moving between the chromatically extended tonality of the early Berg (like his op.1, and also his Four Songs op.2) and the free atonality that emerges in the final movement of Schoenberg’s Second String Quartet op.10 (1908), and the piano pieces op.11 and op.19. This affinity is particularly apparent in Adorno’s songs, which are influenced by Berg’s Four Songs op.2 (1910), by his Altenberg Lieder op.4 (1912), and by Schoenberg’s song cycle from Stefan George’s Das Buch der hängenden Gärten op.15 (1909–1910). Adorno also set poems by Stefan George in his op.1 (1925–1928) and op.7 (1944), and by Georg Trakl in his op.5 (1938–1941), and these settings represent some of his most successful work as a composer.

Composition, Freedom, and the Flight into Order

But the 1920s were also characterized across the arts by a retreat from the experimental freedom of the immediate pre-war years into new forms of order, which in music included neoclassicism on the one hand and the twelve-tone technique on the other (indeed, although often regarded as irreconcilable opposites at the time, both were in effect combined in Schoenberg’s early serial pieces, like the Suite for piano, op.25). In spite of his admiration for these composers, Adorno saw this retrenchment as a betrayal of the experimental upheaval of the early years, and in the opening paragraph of the late and unfinished Ästhetische
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*Theorie* (1970) it is clear that he still saw the period 1908–1914 as the high tide mark of aesthetic modernity. He writes,

The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure … everywhere artists rejoiced less over the newly won realm of freedom than that they immediately sought once again after ostensible yet scarcely adequate order.

(Adorno, GS7, 1970b, 9; 1997b, 1)

Nevertheless, even though Adorno’s music recalled the harmonic world of radical pre-1914 music on its path towards atonality, it has to be said that structurally his pieces often reflect the tendency of much new music in the 1920s to fall back on pre-existing forms and genres. Of the Six Short Pieces for Orchestra op.4, no.3 is a gigue and no.5 is a waltz; on the other hand, although Adorno does sometimes make use of the twelve-tone technique, as in the first piece of his Two Pieces for String Quartet op.2, he does so freely and without following strict serial principles. Nevertheless, however one may judge the artistic merit of Adorno’s compositions, they are not the work of a dilettante, but of a musician immersed in the Austro-German tradition at the period of its greatest ferment and ultimately perhaps of its disintegration. Noting that after the mid-1940s Adorno wrote no more music, apart from revising some earlier pieces, the composer Mathias Spahlinger writes, “There is much to indicate … that for Adorno philosophy belonged more to the realm of necessity, while music belonged – in solidarity with metaphysics in the moment of its fall – rather to the realm of freedom” (Spahlinger, 1989, 35). Adorno considered that freedom in music was no longer possible because of the unfreedom that prevailed in social reality, so that, as Spahlinger puts it, “the philosopher … murdered the composer in 1944” (Spahlinger, 1989, 35, my trans.).

**The Composer as Philosopher**

A strong case has been made for the importance of Adorno’s compositions in the context of his subsequent development as a philosopher, and in 1963, in a *Festschrift* in honour of Adorno’s sixtieth birthday, the conductor and music theorist René Leibowitz had written that “the fact that [Adorno’s] compositions have remained largely unknown says nothing about their significance; if we had not had this unknown music then we would also not have possessed his well-known writings [on music]” (Leibowitz, 1963, 359, my trans.). In his article “Adorno, der Komponist als Philosoph,” Martin Blumentritt has written that in Adorno’s case, “Thinking and composing – each in its own way an expression of social labour of which the Subject is unconscious – illuminate each other reciprocally” (Blumentritt, 1989, 19, my trans.). As a young composer in the period following the First World War, Adorno was faced with the state of musical material as he found it, and it was to this material, at its most extreme stage of technical and expressive development through the works of the Second Viennese School composers, that he responded. In itself this interaction between composer and handed-down material is not primarily a conceptual matter but a practical relationship, where something new is made and in the process subjectivity is exteriorized as an object – the musical work. It is this process that Adorno came to theorize increasingly just as his practical engagement with composition as a practice began to diminish as his activity as philosopher and sociologist increased. What was initially seen as essentially a practical relationship in the intensive correspondence between Adorno and the composer Ernst Krenek in the period from 1929 to 1932 (see Adorno & Krenek, 1974) is viewed sociologically in the course of the 1930s, in particular in “Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik” (“On the Social Situation of Music”) (see Adorno, GS18, 1984, 729–777), and by the 1940s, it is developed in
philosophical terms most extensively (and polemically) in *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (see Adorno, GS12, 1975).

**Philosophy of Music/Music as Philosophy**

The focus of Adorno’s music philosophy is the “objective content” (*Gehalt*) of music, the way in which subjectivity as what he calls the “supra-personal Subject” relates to the handed-down forms and genres, which are social and historical in origin. Adorno argues that this relationship between the “I” (*Ich*) and forms (*Formen*) changes historically, and furthermore that in the modern age this relationship becomes increasingly strained and fractured. In an early article published in the journal *Pult und Taktstock* in 1924, “Zum Problem der Reproduktion”, and clearly under the influence of Georg Lukács’s *Theorie des Romans*, Adorno writes,

If the objective existence of a musical work – not its “what,” its intended [content], but the supra-personal communal beingness to which it relates – if this objective existence is guaranteed through the power of the forms which control the musical Subject and contain it within them, and, furthermore, if the power of the objective forms is extinguished, frozen and broken in loose congruence with the course of musical history, then insight into the kind of objectivity and its historical determinedness might at least lead to some findings that could frame the problem area of interpretation.

(Adorno, GS19, 1984, 440–441, my trans.)

However, all interpretation is partial and incomplete. This is particularly so with music because it is a temporal art. The experience of temporality in music is that of the intensity of the present moment just passing, and while we may attempt to construct a sense of the musical work as a whole through recollection of what has passed and through anticipation of what may still be to come, the totality as such is never immediately present to us. For Adorno, the relationship between part and whole unfolds in music as a process in movement, something that, so he argues, it shares with critical philosophy, which also only has access to the totality through the part. The musical metaphor of the relation of part to whole continued to occupy him philosophically, and many years later he writes in *Negative Dialektik*,

The resistance of philosophy needs to unfold… Even in music – as in all art, presumably – the impulse animating the first bar will not be fulfilled at once, but only in further articulation. To this extent, however much it may be phenomenal as a totality, music is a critique of phenomenality, of the appearance that the substance is present here and now. Such a mediate[d] role befits philosophy no less.


In his 1953 essay “Über das gegenwärtige Verhältnis von Philosophie und Musik” (“On the current relationship between philosophy and music”), Adorno writes of the closeness of music (that is, autonomous art music) to philosophy since the late eighteenth century, to the extent that both have been characterized by critique and self-reflection. In the case of contemporary music, however, he argues that “this critique … becomes manifest as that which it has secretly always been: the formal law of the works themselves” (Adorno, GS18, 1997, 164; 2009, 473). In this, we can see that Adorno proposes not only that music should be the object of interpretation and critique, but also that music can itself be a manifestation of the
critical and self-reflective impulse. Nevertheless, this immanent musical critique practised by music itself through its form is paradoxical because it is non-conceptual in character and speaks to us as a kind of non-propositional “language of things” that still calls for a second level of interpretation on our part through concepts. You could say that at a first level of musical interpretation the performance of a musical work can never be the final, ultimate, and correct interpretation of the piece, because other interpretations are always possible. It is likewise the case with our attempts to understand and interpret a piece of music through concepts, where there are many possible interpretations, some more convincing than others, but none that can be considered completely sufficient or final.

It was in a paper from 1931, “Die Aktualität der Philosophie” (Adorno, GS1, 1973, 325–344), delivered as a lecture on taking up the position of Privatdozent in the Philosophy Department of Frankfurt University, that Adorno first spells out the terms of what is later to become in the 1960s his “negative dialectics”. This concerns the unavoidable situation in which philosophy found itself in the 1920s, caught between the two dominant schools of thought – on the one hand, the phenomenological existentialism of Heidegger, and on the other, the logical empiricism of Schlick and the Vienna Circle. Adorno claimed that both these schools of thought denied the historicality of our knowledge of reality. He argued that philosophy can now only be interpretive and that there are no fixed meanings hidden behind the surface of reality. Interpretation must now seek to illuminate the shifting figures of history in the objects of investigation (see Paddison, 2016, 141–144). It is this that underlies his approach to the interpretation of music as historically and socially mediated.

The Social Situation of Music

The immanent critique practised by music at the level of its autonomous form constitutes one pole of Adorno’s interpretive approach. If taken in isolation, however, Adorno’s position could easily be mistaken for a version of formalism, as epitomized, for example, in the case made by the nineteenth-century Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick in his famous treatise Vom Musikalisch-Schönen. But the autonomy of music is seen by Adorno as an aspect of its reification, an effect of social and economic forces. He argues, furthermore, that it is through its autonomy that music becomes a form of non-conceptual cognition, and it is through its distance from direct involvement in utility and function that it becomes a form of critique. But the emergence of such a notion of autonomy is thoroughly historical and is an aspect of the development of capitalism and the division of labour. Music’s autonomy is regarded by Adorno as fundamentally social in origin, and is contradictory: its formal integrity and consistency is fractured and compromised because of the contradictions of its social situation.

In the opening lines of “Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik” (“On the Social Situation of Music”), Adorno writes,

Wherever music is heard today, it marks in the most precise lines possible the contradictions and fractures that run right through contemporary society, while at the same time music is separated from this same society by the deepest fracture of all – the fragmented totality produced by this society – without, however, that society being capable itself of absorbing more than music’s refuse and ruins.

(Adorno, GS18, 1984, 729, my trans.)

In this passage, Adorno identifies what he sees as the contradictory aspects of music in contemporary society: on the one hand, the commodity status of all music (whether high art or popular music), which is an aspect of its reification, and on the other hand, the critical
character of the most uncompromising advanced contemporary music as “new music” which, so he argues, resists commodification but in so doing alienates itself from society. It is this alienation of musical works as reified musical artefacts that calls for interpretation, not simply through restoring the rejected social context, but through revealing how the social and historical inheres – that is to say, is mediated – in musical objects. An excursion into the concept of mediation is relevant at this point.

Mediation

It is the mediatedness of objects as well as subjects that provided the key for Adorno’s dialectical interpretations of cultural artefacts – something also clearly apparent in the cultural and literary analyses of Walter Benjamin and Leo Löwenthal during the same period. For them, commodities are not simply the mediated relations between people that become seen as “things”; they are mediated within themselves as objects. This perception opened a door to a way of reading musical works, pop songs, novels, popular fiction, paintings, and so on, as apparently self-contained monads permeated by the social, political, and historical currents of their time.

The concept of mediation (Vermittlung) is fundamental to Adorno’s philosophy overall, and I would endorse Norbert Rath’s comment that “Adorno’s philosophy can be understood as the construction of mediations; the concept and process of mediation stand at the centre of his thinking” (Rath, 1982, 137, my trans.). But while the concept of mediation has been most obviously associated with sociology, it has considerable implications for the aesthetics of music on the one hand and for musicology on the other, two disciplines traditionally content to leave any concerns with social relations to the social sciences. Left on its own, however, the discipline of sociology – at least as empirical sociology – is notoriously ill-equipped to tackle the structural particularity of art works, the conceptual generality of philosophical aesthetics, or the problematic subjectivity of the aesthetic experience, and risks reducing all issues concerning art and aesthetics to questions of identity-creation, communication, social relations, or ideology. I would say that Vermittlung for Adorno is also not to be subsumed under a general concept of metaphor or homology, in spite of the determination of some literary theorists to argue that it should be. Vermittlung as a concept must be addressed philosophically, but in music it needs to be understood in specifically musical terms as something material: that is to say, it calls simultaneously for a concept of musical material that recognizes that it is permeated by the social totality. This is not to suggest, however, that what we are dealing with in Adorno’s case is a matter of systematic empirical research into socially determined material: as Peter Uwe Hohendahl has pointed out, “his essays rarely uphold rigid methodological distinctions. Through the dialectical structure of their argument they prefer to explore invisible, even seemingly improbable connections, frequently using a minor detail as a point of departure” (Hohendahl, 1995, 167). Adorno holds fast to his Hegelian principle of using the part to illuminate the dialectical relationship to the whole, while at the same time avoiding identifying with the whole.

Sociology of Music

Seen in this larger context, the frequently cited section 7 from the 1967 essay “Thesen zur Kunstsoziologie” (“Theses on the Sociology of Art”) remains illuminating and definitive, in that it makes it clear that Adorno’s concept of mediation is to be philosophically conceived while at the same time being applied in a sociological context to the specificity of art works, and furthermore that it is defined in opposition to the prevailing identification of mediation with communication. And Adorno further emphasizes where he sees mediation as being
located in relation to art works: “What I mean, in other words, is the very specific question aimed at products of the mind [Geist], as to how social structural moments, positions, ideologies and whatever else, assert themselves in the works of art themselves” (Adorno, 1972, 128; GS10.1, 1977, 374). What Adorno calls “mediation” is, by his own admission, an extremely complex and difficult concept, in that it brings together art-specific, sociological and philosophical moments which, even though they can each be addressed separately, can only profitably be understood in relation to each other – a relationship that is not one of the resolution of antinomies, but rather of their intensification. Indeed, the social mediation of the art work for Adorno comes down to what seems at first sight its irreducible opposite: its autonomous form. He writes concerning the aim of his music sociology,

I [have] brought out the extraordinary difficulty of the question quite deliberately and without reducing it, and thereby the difficulty of a sociology of music which is not satisfied with external arrangements, not satisfied with the position of art in society, with the effects it has in society but which wants to know how society objectivates itself in works of art.

(Adorno, 1972, 128; GS10.1, 1977, 374)

This remarkable inversion of the usual priorities of a specialized sociology of music, from the effects and function of music in society towards the mediated manifestations of society in music, returns us to the problem of how to interpret the social content of music. As we have seen, this, for Adorno, is a philosophical problem, and he argues that “sociology was born as philosophy” and that “it still needs today, if it is not to remain quite a-conceptual, the type of reflection and speculation that originated in philosophy” (Adorno, GS10.1, 373; 1972, 127). This also brings us back to the question of interpretation – in this case of the idea of musical works as critical reflection on historically transmitted musical material.

New Music and Historical Material

Adorno’s notion of a historical dialectic of material is derived in large part from Schoenberg’s conviction that the composer must respond to the historical necessity carried by the musical material. Because of this it has led to criticism that Adorno’s whole philosophy of music is entirely centred on the historical tradition of Austro-German music and the autonomy aesthetic that goes with this. These kinds of criticisms are usually based on a rather one-sided reading of Philosophy of New Music. As becomes clear from Adorno’s historical-philosophical interpretation of the music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he sees the “historical tendency of musical material” as characterized by discontinuity, not simply by a smooth continuity of historical progression stretching unbroken from Bach to Schoenberg to Stockhausen and beyond. Adorno’s perception that the historical progress of musical material (which in large part is progress in technique and technology) is at every stage accompanied by the disintegration of material and, in particular, of forms is illuminating. His discussion of Berlioz in relation to Beethoven is particularly instructive in this respect (see Paddison, 1993, 233–242) and should serve to counter monolithic readings of Adorno.

Musical Material

In brief, Adorno claims that the material of music is itself socially and culturally pre-formed, before any individual act of composition even begins. The material consists of handed-down, previous engagements with the material, as musical works, forms, genres, style systems, compositional procedures, and conventions. It could also be said to embrace techniques and
developments in musical instrument technology, tonal systems, and tuning systems. It involves modes of performance and reproduction. Importantly, it also now embraces recording techniques and studio technology, together with electro-acoustics, sound production, and diffusion. All of this now constitutes musical material in ways that Adorno perhaps could not have predicted, but which nevertheless may be understood as “sedimented society” and thus as part of the material transmission of social norms.

The concept of artistic material can be located in broad terms in the early part of the twentieth century, and it is clear that it was a general concern for artists across all the arts at a time when traditional forms and traditional materials were fragmenting and being thrown into question. It is in critical dialogue with a number of his contemporaries, in particular the composers Arnold Schoenberg, Paul Hindemith, Hanns Eisler, and Ernst Krenek, that Adorno formulated his own theory of material in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The influence of Schoenberg’s music and his theorizing is most obvious and pervasive. Indeed, Adorno’s understanding of developments in Schoenberg’s music was also undoubtedly influenced by his reading of the composer’s Harmonielehre of 1911 (although probably in its 1922 revision). In this work are to be found many suggestions regarding the historical and dialectical character of musical material which were taken over directly by Adorno and elaborated within the context of his larger social theory. Also significant is the now-neglected August Halm, who in his Von zwei Kulturen der Musik of 1913 had put forward a historical and developmental theory of music through analogy with changes in social consciousness. The influence of Halm, together with that of Ernst Bloch in his Geist der Utopie and later in his Prinzip Hoffnung, pervades Adorno’s notion of the historical dialectic of musical material as progress of Spirit (Geist) towards freedom (see Paddison, 1993, 65–107).

Adorno had shown an interest in the music of Eisler and Krenek from the start and had published a number of reviews of early performances of their work in the 1920s. I suggest that what particularly drew Adorno to them was their readiness to discuss the compositional process as part of a larger cultural context, both social and historical. With Eisler, Adorno later (in the 1940s) collaborated on the book Composing for the Films. With Krenek, there developed, through correspondence, radio discussions, and published articles, the important debate on the concept of musical material and the relationship of the composer towards it which enabled Adorno to bring the various strands of his developing theory into focus. This theory is first outlined in 1932 as part of a larger social theory of music in his essay “On the Social Situation of Music.”

Adorno’s theory of musical material has been one of the most criticized aspects of his music philosophy and sociology – another being his critique of popular music. It is my view that the theory of material only makes sense when we consider it not as a theory of integration and continuity, which has been the grounds for most of the attacks it has sustained, but instead as a theory of the disintegration of musical material in the face of the absolute need on the part of the composer to attempt to achieve the opposite – the integration of the musical composition as structure. In his critique of popular music, on the other hand, Adorno argues that the available material is simply the degenerated material of art music (he uses the term Verfall des Materials) and that popular songs (he is rather vague when it comes to distinctions between types and genres of popular music) are designed by the culture industry from the outset as commodities for passive consumption. Whereas radical art music – the “New Music” – may, to varying degrees, resist commodification through its critical relation to its material at the level of its form, Adorno can conceive of no circumstances under which popular music, whether as jazz or rock music, might also have a similar relationship to its material. Most of Adorno’s writings on popular music date from the 1930s and 1940s, and it is possible to argue, as I have elsewhere (Paddison, 1982), that much popular music at that period was highly standardized, and this can explain Adorno’s rather dogmatic views on the
subject. However, when he revisited the discussion in 1962 in the “Leichte Musik” chapter of his book Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie (Introduction to the Sociology of Music) little had changed from his perspective, although popular music itself was changing rapidly in the course of the 1960s. He writes in the revised edition that appeared in 1968, “To this day, pop music has scarcely participated in the evolution of material that has been going on in serious music for more than fifty years” (Adorno, GS14, 1973, 203; 1976, 24–25).

Although Adorno was not the first to address the concept of material in relation to the New Music, he was, I suggest, the first to examine the concept of material critically, and to do so at a time when composers in the West could no longer take a received notion of appropriate musical materials as a given, because everything had been thrown into question and solutions, sometimes desperate, sometimes radically innovative, were already being sought. This locates the historical emergence of a specific concept of material quite precisely. In Aesthetic Theory, Adorno suggests that “the concept of material may first have taken conscious shape in the [nineteen] twenties” (AT, 148). This is certainly the period after initial, perhaps intuitive, experimenting when artists begin to ask themselves what it is that they were doing, and to set about rationalizing in some way or other their course of action. The examples are well known: Schoenberg’s rationalization of free atonality in the form of the twelve-tone technique appears in the early 1920s; Stravinsky and neoclassicism begin to stabilize (to use a term from Adorno’s article “Die stabilisierte Musik” from the 1920s) their technical procedures and stylistic models, although the writing about this is left to others at the time; the painter Paul Klee sets about rationalizing and systematising his approach to painting and, notably, drawing in the famous Pedagogical Sketchbook (1925); and then in the 1930s, Hindemith, the enfant terrible of the early twenties, thoroughly rationalizes his own approach to harmony in 1937 in his Unterweisung im Tonsatz, even to the extent of recomposing certain significant (and already successful) earlier works like the song cycle Das Marienleben to bring them into line with his newly systematized theory of harmony. This is also the period in which Adorno himself began to examine the concept, first of all in his early concert reviews of works by his contemporaries Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Stravinsky, Bartók, Hindemith, Weill, and Eisler, among others, and then in the remarkable correspondence with Ernst Krenek between 1929 and 1932 about problems relating to contemporary composition, technique, and material.

Debates on New Music

The debates with Krenek concerned the nature of the composer’s relation to musical material: Krenek took the line that the composer was the sovereign creator who selected the material as needed from among all available possibilities, whereas Adorno’s position was that the composer’s choice was severely limited by the historical stage reached by the material and that not all possibilities were actually available. Indeed, he insisted that the material itself made historical demands to which the composer had no choice but respond. Adorno also linked the concept of “consistency”, or “coherence” (Stimmigkeit) with the idea of progress and progressiveness in relation to musical material – that is to say, those composers who responded to the objective demands of the handed-down material were progressive and, by implication, their music was “authentic” (at this period he employed the term echt, later authentisch). In an article from 1930 which grew out of this debate, “Reaktion und Fortschritt” (“Reaction and Progress”, to which Krenek wrote a companion article entitled “Progress and Reaction”), Adorno argued that

it is only in its immanent consistency that a work proves itself as progressive. In each work the material registers concrete demands, and the movement with which
each new work manifests these is the sole obligatory shape [Gestalt] of history for the author. A work that meets these demands completely is consistent [stimmig].

(Adorno, 1974, 176, my trans.)

A further aspect of the relation to material discussed by Adorno and Krenek is the long-standing debate as to whether musical material is to be regarded as of natural or historical/cultural origin. Adorno argues that all that is meaningful in musical material is historical and social in origin, and that indeed musical material is not nature but is culturally pre-formed, so that what the composer engages with when composing is sedimented history and society. He writes, “Whatever nature might be to start with, it receives the seal of authenticity [Echtheit] from history. History enters into the constellation of truth” (Adorno, 1974, 179, my trans.). And yet material is also always historical, it is always “used”, second-hand, and in spite of appearances (for example, the harmonic series, tuning systems, scale systems) it is never natural. As he puts it, “Thus material is not natural material even if it appears so to artists; rather, it is thoroughly historical” (Adorno, 1970, 223; 1997, 148). It is this historicality that the composer works with, and which, argues Adorno most controversially, constitutes, in very Schoenbergian terms, its “historical necessity” and its “historical tendency”.

From the start, Adorno’s concept of material is characterized above all by a single dominating idea: that musical material is dynamic, in a process of change, development, and decay, rather than static and ontologically fixed. It grows old, and there is a historical degeneration, debasement, and disintegration of materials. An adequate understanding of this fundamental idea would appear to lead in two opposing directions: (1) that Adorno’s concept of material is a liberating concept, offering perspectives that open out on to areas perhaps undreamed of by Adorno, but which nevertheless are implied in his idea; and (2) that Adorno’s concept of material underpins a modernist position from which it cannot be separated. The implications of this latter point are that the concept of material in Adorno marks a philosophical position: that material is not static, but rather a process of becoming – that is, changing through acquiring new material features from current usage – but that it is not to be understood apart from a concept of form which is conceived as critically self-reflexive and as a mode of cognition. For Adorno material is always already pre-formed, and is then formed again in the structure of individual works. This constitutes the self-reflexivity of form, and contained here, in the critical relation to handed-down material, is his radically modernist aesthetic.

Conclusion

In view of all this, what has the example of Adorno’s musical writings contributed to the way we are able to talk about music now? Carl Dahlhaus has argued that Adorno was really the first … who, in the most unrestricted sense, was both a musician and a philosopher. Great philosophers have seldom understood much about music beyond the measure of the bourgeois notion of a generalized cultural education. On the other hand, musicians were seldom philosophers.

And he concludes,

it was just this that made such a profound impression on our generation. And I see Adorno’s importance to a large extent as lying in the fact that he established a level at which it was possible to write about music.

(Dahlhaus, Finscher, Kaiser, 1971, 436)
What Dahlhaus is proposing is that Adorno, as well as being able to talk about music in its own terms as a musician, was also able to interpret intra-musical processes both philosophically and sociologically without betraying the autonomy of the music by reducing musical works or processes to the level of social or historical documents. It is tempting to say that the writings on music are a special case of the sociological and philosophical concerns of Adorno’s overarching approach to critical theory and that they address, thematically and conceptually, the same problems applied to music. At the same time, however, the relationship between the development of his approach to critical theory and his thinking on music is reciprocal. That is to say, it is not only that he approaches music as a critical theorist, but that his approach to critical theory has also been shaped by his experience of music, and especially by his practical experience as a composer. For Adorno the shared factor is that critical theory is necessarily an interpretive practice rather than simply a body of knowledge, just as music, whether as composition, musical performance, or music criticism, is an interpretive practice and not simply the contemplation of a canon of great works of the past. Indeed, as we have seen, Adorno claimed that music itself can also be a form of cognition and critical reflection.

When Adorno argued that the role of all music today is “exclusively that of a commodity” (Adorno, 1978a, 128; GS18, 1984, 729) – and in saying this he made no exceptions – what was significant for him was the position taken by music faced with its social situation: that is to say, whether to accept its role as commodity or to resist it. He maintained that the autonomous instrumental music of the bourgeois period was both reflexive (through its relation to its autonomy of form) and critical (through its relation to its historically and socially mediated material). He regarded music therefore not only as demanding critical reflection through philosophy and social theory, but also, in the case of autonomous music and in particular radical “new music” in the social context of Western capitalism, as being itself a non-conceptual mode of critical reflection through its form. Already in 1932 he talks of a type of music that “without consciousness of its social location or out of indifference toward it, presents and crystallizes its problems and the solutions thereto in a merely immanent manner” (Adorno, 1978a, 132; GS18, 1984, 734). I have pursued his dual conception of the relation between music and philosophy – that is, on the one hand, the philosophical and sociological critique of music and, on the other hand, the idea of music itself being a form of conceptless critique – while also placing it in the larger context of critical theory. I have argued that it is the field of tension that characterizes the experience of so-called “autonomous” or “absolute” music (and which could be formulated as the conflict between on the one hand the extension of the experience of music through concepts and on the other hand the resistance of music to conceptualization), that becomes itself the model for Adorno’s philosophy of nonidentity – a philosophy that, as negative dialectics, was also considered by him to constitute a social and political critique. Underlying his approach is the conviction that, faced with the fragmentation of the modern world, philosophy can now only proceed through interpretation, rather than through claiming to be scientific or through the construction of totalizing systems. This is, I suggest, a notion of interpretation derived ultimately from his experience of music.

References


Further Reading


