

**Response paper on  
Theodor W. Adorno's "The Aging of the New Music"**

For Theodor Adorno in 1955, the situation of new music was bleak, and this, according to him, is attributable to several interconnected factors. Perhaps the one that composers of new music had little control over was what Adorno refers to as the "inconvenient interruption of the Third Reich" (Adorno/Ed. Leppert, p. 195). At this time he states, "The only authentic artworks produced today are those that in their inner organization measure themselves by the fullest experience of horror, and there is scarcely anyone, except Schoenberg or Picasso, who can depend on himself to have the power to do this." He accuses the majority of composers of new music of lacking backbone, of being weak and anxious, and of letting this overtake their musical sensibilities.

Another factor contributing to the "seriously threatened" state of music he claims to be a complete disconnect with expression and meaning. Since music, he says, traditionally was based on a resemblance to speech, the meaninglessness of the newest musical efforts essentially misses the point. Music, by its nature cannot escape meaning since we have in our ears the history of tonality and by intentionally removing meaning from music by organizing sounds in a mathematical and technical way, without any attention to form and structure as composers like Schoenberg and Webern, composers are also removing music's *raison d'être*. The ideas of musical coherence, organization, expectation, and fulfillment thereof (or not) which are at the basis of the fundamentals of music are liquidated and hence the music is just an arbitrary collection of notes that are neither appreciable (by any educated or authentic way) by the listener, nor intelligent in any intellectual way.

On the subject of the listener, New Music, Adorno says should be jarring, strange, and unfamiliar, however New Music rejects beauty but should also be “distressing and confused.” He attributes the aging of New Music to the “waning of inner tension” and “the waning of formative power” (p. 182), in other words composers are softening, conforming, and the shock of music that rejects the status quo and attempts novelty is dying away.

The qualities of music by Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Bartók and a couple of others that guarantee them a spot on the good composer list according to Adorno are as follows. Firstly, they were all brought up with the tradition of tonal music, classical form, folk music, etc, and the newness in their music was a continuation of that music as much as it was informed by that music. The freshness of their writing was in the musical material, but the construction and expressive character are traditional. All of the elements that make music what it is such as thematic construction, expression, tension and release, all still hold true in this music. In total serialism, however, for example, in Boulez’ music, where there is a goal of pure objectivity, only pretense results. This is because the relationships between notes in time are not so easily done away with. As Adorno puts it, “Something purely irrational is hidden in the midst of rationalization, a confidence in the meaningfulness of abstract material, in which the subject fails to recognize that it, itself, releases the meaning from the material.” (ibid, p. 189)

In an effort to create something new, composers are merely writing anything, and the direction of things, says Adorno, is towards absurdity. There is no reconciliation with humanity here, only a senselessness and dissolution of art. And to make matters work music critics whose sole purpose is to judge these new works, take usually one of several roads, either praising indiscriminately (in case the work might be the next masterpiece), dismissing music on the basis of their own lack of understanding, or reducing the parameters of their

criticism to whether they happen to like the sound or not. This only exacerbates the problem of new music.

Finally another factor contributing to the demise of music is the conservatories and music schools that provide little or no technical standards by which to judge new music. The lack of appreciation of models such as Palestrina voice-leading, Bach chorales, and such, makes for a sad state of affairs for young musicians desiring to become composers, performers, critics, etc.

Having been written 54 years ago, this article is a warning by Adorno that “the foundation of music, as of every art, the very possibility of taking this aesthetic seriously has been deeply shaken” (p. 199). He warns that indeed the livelihood of musicians is threatened and the promise of a future for music looks seriously dim. Fifty-four years later it is clear that although his philosophies seem somewhat founded in truth, the fear of the disappearance of music or the death, implied by aging, of music is unwarranted. The New Music world is as healthy as it’s ever been, commissions and performances abound, and innovations in the world of composition continue to arise in the modern music world.