

35 Theodor W. Adorno

Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) was a leading German philosopher and social critic who devoted a significant portion of his work to music, most notably his book *Philosophy of New Music*. Trained as a composer under Alban Berg, Adorno was especially concerned with how music reflects and is influenced by larger social and intellectual issues. In this essay, written in 1945 when he was a refugee in the United States, Adorno examines the effects of mass media—specifically radio—on music and the musical experience. While openly betraying the exclusively “high-art” orientation of his thought (evident in his contemptuous dismissal of popular music and jazz), Adorno raises issues that continue to be seriously debated: the growing commodification and standardization of music, the detrimental effect of electronic transmission on listening (in particular the tendency toward “atomization”—dwelling on the part rather than the whole)—and the power of mass media to instill its audiences with a sense of “smugness and self-satisfaction.”

FROM A Social Critique of Radio Music (1945)

Some would approach the problem of radio by formulating questions of this type: If we confront such and such a sector of the population with such and such a type of music, what reactions may we expect? How can these reactions be measured and expressed statistically? Or: How many sectors of the population have been brought into contact with music and how do they respond to it?

What intention lies behind such questions? This approach falls into two major operations:

(a) We subject some groups to a number of different treatments and see how they react to each.

(b) We select and recommend the procedure which produces the effect we desire.

The aim itself, the tool by which we achieve it, and the persons upon whom it works are generally taken for granted in this procedure. The guiding interest behind such investigations is basically one of *administrative* technique: how to manipulate the masses. The pattern is that of market analysis even if it appears to be completely remote from any selling purpose. It might be research of an *exploitive* character, i.e. guided by the desire to induce as large a section of the

population as possible to buy a certain commodity. Or it may be what Paul F. Lazarsfeld calls *benevolent* administrative research, putting questions such as, “How can we bring good music to as large a number of listeners as possible?”

I would like to suggest an approach that is antagonistic to exploitive and at least supplementary to benevolent administrative research. It abandons the form of question indicated by a sentence like: How can we, under given conditions, best further certain aims? On the contrary, this approach in some cases questions the aims and in all cases the successful accomplishment of these aims under the given conditions. Let us examine the question: how can good music be conveyed to the largest possible audience?

What is “good music”? Is it just the music which is given out and accepted as “good” according to current standards, say the programs of the Toscanini concerts? We cannot pass it as “good” simply on the basis of the names of great composers or performers, that is, by social convention. Furthermore, is the goodness of music invariant, or is it something that may change in the course of history with the technique at our disposal? For instance, let us take it for granted—as I do—that Beethoven really is good music. Is it not possible that this music, by the very problems it sets for itself, is far away from our own situation? That by constant repetition it has deteriorated so much that it has ceased to be the living force it was and has become a museum piece which no longer possesses the power to speak to the millions to whom it is brought? Or, even if this is not so, and if Beethoven in a musically young country like America is still as fresh as on the first day, is radio actually an adequate means of communication? Does a symphony played on the air remain a symphony? Are the changes it undergoes by wireless transmission merely slight and negligible modifications or do those changes affect the very essence of the music? Are not the stations in such a case bringing the masses in contact with something totally different from what it is supposed to be, thus also exercising an influence quite different from the one intended? And as to the large numbers of people who listen to “good music”: *how* do they listen to it? Do they listen to a Beethoven symphony in a concentrated mood? Can they do so even if they want to? Is there not a strong likelihood that they listen to it as they would to a Tchaikovsky symphony, that is to say, simply listen to some neat tunes or exciting harmonic stimuli? Or do they listen to it as they do to jazz, waiting in the introduction of the finale of Brahms’s First Symphony for the solo of the French horn, as they would for Benny Goodman’s solo clarinet chorus? Would not such a type of listening make the high cultural ideal of bringing good music to large numbers of people altogether illusory?

These questions have arisen out of the consideration of so simple a phrase as “bringing good music to as large an audience as possible.” None of these or similar questions can be wholly solved in terms of even the most benevolent research of the administrative type. One should not study the attitude of listeners without considering how far these attitudes reflect broader social behavior patterns and, even more, how far they are conditioned by the structure of

society as a whole. This leads directly to the problem of a social critique of radio music, that of discovering social position and function. We first state certain axioms.

(a) We live in a society of commodities—that is, a society in which production of goods is taking place, not primarily to satisfy human wants and needs, but for profit. Human needs are satisfied only incidentally as it were. This basic condition of production affects the form of the product as well as the human interrelationships.

(b) In our commodity society there exists a general trend toward a heavy concentration of capital which makes for a shrinking of the free market in favor of monopolized mass production of standardized goods; this holds true particularly of the communications industry.

(c) The more the difficulties of contemporary society increase as it seeks its own continuance, the stronger becomes the general tendency to maintain, by all means available, the existing conditions of power and property relations against the threats which they themselves breed. Whereas on the one hand standardization necessarily follows from the conditions of contemporary economy, it becomes, on the other hand, one of the means of preserving a commodity society at a stage in which, according to the level of the productive forces, it has already lost its justification.

(d) Since in our society the forces of production are highly developed, and, at the same time, the relations of production fetter those productive forces, it is full of antagonisms. These antagonisms are not limited to the economic sphere where they are universally recognized, but dominate also the cultural sphere where they are less easily recognized.

How did music become, as our first axiom asserts it to be, a commodity? After music lost its feudal protectors during the latter part of the 18th Century it had to go to the market. The market left its imprint on it either because it was manufactured with a view to its selling chances, or because it was produced in conscious and violent reaction against the market requirements. What seems significant, however, in the present situation, and what is certainly deeply connected with the trend to standardization and mass production, is that *today the commodity character of music tends radically to alter it*. Bach in his day was considered, and considered himself, an artisan, although his music functioned as art. Today music is considered ethereal and sublime, although it actually functions as a commodity. Today the terms ethereal and sublime have become trademarks. Music has become a means instead of an end, a fetish. That is to say, music has ceased to be a human force and is consumed like other consumers' goods. This produces "commodity listening," a listening whose ideal it is to dispense as far as possible with any effort on the part of the recipient—even if such an effort on the part of the recipient is the necessary condition of grasping the sense of the music. It is the ideal of Aunt Jemima's ready-mix for pancakes extended to the field of music. The listener suspends all intellectual activity

when dealing with music and is content with consuming and evaluating its gustatory qualities—just as if the music which tasted best were also the best music possible.

Famous master violins may serve as a drastic illustration of musical fetishism. Whereas only the expert is able to distinguish a "Strad" from a good modern fiddle, and whereas he is often least preoccupied with the tone quality of the fiddles, the layman, induced to treat these instruments as commodities, gives them a disproportionate attention and even a sort of adoration. One radio company went so far as to arrange a cycle of broadcasts looking, not primarily to the music played, nor even to the performance, but to what might be called an acoustic exhibition of famous instruments such as Paganini's violin and Chopin's piano. This shows how far the commodity attitude in radio music goes, though under a cloak of culture and erudition.

Our second axiom—increasing standardization—is bound up with the commodity character of music. There is, first of all, the haunting similarity between most musical programs, except for the few non-conformist stations which use recorded material of serious music; and also the standardization of orchestral performance, despite the musical trademark of an individual orchestra. And there is, above all, that whole sphere of music whose lifeblood is standardization: popular music, jazz, be it hot, sweet, or hybrid.

The third point of our social critique of radio concerns its ideological effect. Radio music's ideological tendencies realize themselves regardless of the intent of radio functionaries. There need be nothing intentionally malicious in the maintenance of vested interests. Nonetheless, music under present radio auspices serves to keep listeners from criticizing social realities; in short, it has a soporific effect upon social consciousness. The illusion is furthered that the best is just good enough for the man in the street. The ruined farmer is consoled by the radio-instilled belief that Toscanini is playing for him and for him alone, and that an order of things that allows him to hear Toscanini compensates for low market prices for farm products; even though he is ploughing cotton under, radio is giving him culture. Radio music is calling back to its broad bosom all the prodigal sons and daughters whom the harsh father has expelled from the door. In this respect radio music offers a new function not inherent in music as an art—the function of creating smugness and self-satisfaction.

The last group of problems in a social critique of radio would be those pertaining to social antagonisms. While radio marks a tremendous technical advance, it has proved an impetus to progress neither in music itself nor in musical listening. Radio is an essentially new technique of musical reproduction. But it does not broadcast, to any considerable extent, serious modern music. It limits itself to music created under pre-radio conditions. Nor has it, itself, thus far evoked any music really adequate to its technical conditions.

The most important antagonisms arise in the field of so-called musical mass-

culture. Does the mass distribution of music really mean a rise of musical culture? Are the masses actually brought into contact with the kind of music which, from broader social considerations, may be regarded as desirable? Are the masses really participating in music culture or are they merely forced consumers of musical commodities? What is the role that music actually, not verbally, plays for them?

Under the aegis of radio there has set in a retrogression of listening. In spite of and even because of the quantitative increase in musical delivery, the psychological effects of this listening are very much akin to those of the motion picture and sport spectatoritis which promotes a retrogressive and sometimes even infantile type of person. "Retrogressive" is meant here in a psychological and not a purely musical sense.

An illustration: A symphony of the Beethoven type, so-called classical, is one of the most highly integrated musical forms. The whole is everything; the part, that is to say, what the layman calls the melody, is relatively unimportant. Retrogressive listening to a symphony is listening which, instead of grasping that whole, dwells upon those melodies, just as if the symphony were structurally the same as a ballad. There exists today a tendency to listen to Beethoven's Fifth as if it were a set of quotations from Beethoven's Fifth. We have developed a larger framework of concepts such as atomistic listening and quotation listening, which lead us to the hypothesis that something like a musical children's language is taking shape.

As today a much larger number of people listen to music than in pre-radio days, it is difficult to compare today's mass-listening with what could be called the elite listening of the past. Even if we restrict ourselves, however to select groups of today's listeners (say, those who listen to the Philharmonics in New York and Boston), one suspects that the Philharmonic listener of today listens in radio terms. A clear indication is the relation to serious advanced modern music. In the Wagnerian period, the elite listener was eager to follow the most daring musical exploits. Today the corresponding group is the firmest bulwark against musical progress and feels happy only if it is fed Beethoven's Seventh Symphony again and again.

In analyzing the fan mail of an educational station in a rural section in the Middle West, which has been emphasizing serious music at regular hours with a highly skilled and resourceful announcer, one is struck by the apparent enthusiasm of the listeners' reception, by the vast response, and by the belief in the highly progressive social function that this program was fulfilling. I have read all of those letters and cards very carefully. They are exuberant indeed. But they are enthusiastic in a manner that makes one feel uncomfortable. It is what might be called standardized enthusiasm. The communications are almost literally identical: "Dear X, Your Music Shop is swell. It widens my musical horizon and gives me an ever deeper feeling for the profound qualities of our great music. I can no longer bear the trashy jazz which we usually have to listen to. Continue with your grand work and let us have more of it." No musical item

was mentioned, no specific reference to any particular feature was made, no criticism was offered, although the programs were amateurish and planless.

It would do little good to explain these standard responses by reference to the difficulty in verbalizing musical experience: for anybody who has had profound musical experiences and finds it hard to verbalize them may stammer and use awkward expressions, but he would be reluctant, even if he knew no other, to cloak them in rubber stamp phrases. I am forced to another explanation. The listeners were strongly under the spell of the announcer as the personified voice of radio as a social institution, and they responded to his call to prove one's cultural level and education by appreciating this good music. But they actually failed to achieve that very appreciation which stamped them as cultured. They took refuge in repeating, often literally, the announcer's speeches in behalf of culture. Their behavior might be compared with that of the fanatical radio listener entering a bakery and asking for "that delicious, golden crispy Bond Bread."

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36 Lawrence Gilman

The commercialization of music referred to by Theodor Adorno in the previous entry is reflected in this talk by the American music writer Lawrence Gilman (1878–1939), presented during the intermission of Arturo Toscanini's final radio broadcast with the NBC Symphony on April 26, 1938. Gilman, music critic for the *New York Tribune* (later *Herald-Tribune*) from 1923 until his death, was a pioneering author in the field later known as "music appreciation." Among his books were *Stories of Symphonic Music* (New York, 1907), *Aspects of Modern Opera* (New York, 1909), and *Nature in Music and Other Studies* (New York, 1914). In this address Gilman praises Toscanini as being no less than "vicar of the Immortals" and "music-lover in excelsis." Such adulation helped shape the "star system" that has become so characteristic of twentieth-century concert life and that provides one essential component of the packaging of music for mass consumption. The following excerpts present the opening and closing portions of Gilman's address.