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The Language-Character of Music: Some Motifs in Adorno

MAX PADDISON

INTRODUCTION

QUESTIONS concerning Western art music's relation to language can be seen to arise directly from the most fundamental paradox of so-called 'autonomous' or 'absolute' musical works: that they seem to say something, the precise meaning of which remains concealed. It is the aim of this article to explore the 'linguisticality' of autonomous music – its similarity to, and yet difference from, language – through a close reading of certain motifs in the work of T. W. Adorno. Crudely stated, Adorno identifies the fundamental polarity underlying autonomous music's 'language-character' (Sprachcharakter) as that between the internal relations of the hermetically sealed musical work and the external social relations of music's production, reproduction, distribution and consumption. It is the tension between these extremes which generates music's dynamic context or 'complex of meaning' (Sinnzusammenhang). Implicit in the approach taken here, therefore, is the argument that linguistic (or indeed any other) theories applied to music make sense only in the context of a larger cultural theory.

The schematization of aspects of Adorno's thinking put forward in this article represents one particular reading of his widely scattered comments on music and language. Given the deliberately 'antisystematic' way in which Adorno typically presented his ideas – at least, in terms of the traditional academic discourse – many different patterns of interpretation are conceivable, depending on what one chooses to privilege. On one level, the aim here is to bring to the fore Adorno's arguments concerning the contradictory (that is, dialectical) character of music's similarity to language. On another level, however, such an aim inevitably raises the whole issue of the validity of 'interpreting' Adorno in the first place: is any attempt at interpretation, at the 're-presentation' of Adorno's ideas in a form other than that of their original presentation, tantamount to a betrayal of the ideas themselves? As is well known (to the extent that prefatory comments such as these have become obligatory for any discussion of his work), Adorno's texts are constructed in such a way as to resist appropriation and exploitation by uncritical and unreflective modes of thought. The issue of systematization is therefore also a political issue. 'Power and knowledge are synonymous', writes Adorno citing Bacon in Dialectic of Enlightenment. ¹ He argues that to systematize is to impose a

A shorter version of this article was read as a paper at the Royal Musical Association Annual Conference on 8 April 1989.

unity upon the dissimilar, a false totality which betrays difference in the interests of equivalence and exchangeability.

At the same time, however, Adorno's writings demand a systematic – that is, active, detailed and critical – reading, and anything less is to betray them equally effectively through fetishizing their complexity as poetic obscurity. It is my view that the contradiction which seems to lie at the heart of Adorno's work, namely that his antisystematic texts demand a systematic reading, is not really a contradiction at all. Adorno's writings are antisystematic but not unsystematic, and underlying their fragmented surface is a systematic, critical methodology which, because the form its expression takes is to proceed through antitheses, resists rigidification into a totalizing system. The obligation placed on the reader of such texts is rather like that of the category of the 'structural listener' Adorno puts forward in his typology of listeners in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*: this type (also called by Adorno the 'expert listener') 'tends to miss nothing and at the same time, at each moment, accounts to himself for what he has heard'. For the reader of Adorno's texts the obligation is also 'to miss nothing', to focus on the detail and simultaneously to relate the fragment to the larger movement of his thought. In this article I have emphasized the process of contradiction itself (in the Hegelian, dialectical sense of the term). In using aspects of Adorno's thinking to discuss the language-character of music I have sought to stress the multi-layered and open-ended character of musical meaning – meaning which is simultaneously immanent-formal, social and historical.

The article falls into four main sections. First, the autonomy status of Western high-art music is considered in relation to its heteronomous origins (i.e. in terms of social function), in the light of Adorno's suggestion that music's language-character has emerged as a result of its emancipation from direct social function. Second, the idea of the 'mediation' of musical structures by social structures is discussed in terms of Adorno's use of the concepts of mimesis and rationality. He suggests that the traces of music's social origins are to be discovered in sublimated form within the structure of autonomous musical works, as 'sedimented gestures'. Third, the article considers the relation between universals and particulars as an essential feature of any comparison of music and language. Finally, with the disintegration of absolutes and universals, the antagonistic character of musical form is discussed. Adorno's binary oppositions identity/non-identity and sameness/difference are drawn on at this stage, in the context of what he called his 'material theory of musical form'. The article concludes with a consideration of Adorno's prediction of the 'end of the age of autonomy' and of the emergence of a 'second mass musical language'.

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THE AUTONOMY-CHARACTER OF MUSIC AND ITS HETERONOMOUS ORIGINS

When Adorno suggests that music has a ‘language-character’, and that it constitutes a form of ‘cognition without concepts’ (begrifflose Erkenntnis), he is referring specifically to what is usually called ‘autonomous music’. Before turning to the question of music's 'linguisticality', therefore, it would seem wise first to deal briefly with the related question of its 'autonomy'.

By 'autonomous music' Adorno refers to that tradition characterized by the rise to dominance of instrumental music in the West, in the period roughly from the European Enlightenment to the present day. It is a music which has freed itself historically from direct social function and from dependence on words – for example, from any immediate function it might have had as part of ritual, both religious and secular, as accompaniment to the dance, or as an appendage to ceremonial or military occasions. It is because of its autonomy-status, Adorno argues, that music has become language-like in its own right. In becoming separated from direct social function, it has developed its own internal dynamic, one of increasing logicality, rationalization and technical control of all aspects of its material. It has developed a complex syntax, teleology, intentionality and narrativity, all of which lend it the character of language. The question of music's autonomy is, however, contentious.

Although art music in the West has, in one sense, become autonomous and self-contained, and has developed its own internal dynamic laws, in another sense this so-called autonomy is misleading and can be seen to have ideological implications. It can be argued that autonomous music still remains very much part of the larger social process. According to Adorno, autonomous music is 'social' in two ways: (1) it reproduces in mediated (that is, not direct or immediate) form the dominant tendencies of society, within its own terms of reference – here Adorno is drawing particularly on Max Weber's theory concerning the process of progressive rationalization within Western society; and (2) autonomous music is itself

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4 See Adorno, 'Über das gegenwärtige Verhältnis von Philosophie und Musik' (1953), GS, xviii (1984), 160–2. Sprachcharakter can be translated variously as 'language-character', 'linguistic-character' or 'speech-character'.


6 The concept of 'ideology' is to be understood here in its specialized sociological sense, i.e. vested interests masquerading as objective or disinterested attitudes, or claiming to be in accord with 'natural laws' or common sense.

7 Max Weber (1864–1920) argued that the overriding tendency of Western culture was towards the ever-increasing rationalization of all aspects of social life, together with the progressive domination of nature which he considered this process implied. This was to be seen not only in science, industry, business, administration and government, but also in politics, religion and the arts. The process of progressive rationalization was at the same time a process of disenchantment and demythologization. Weber linked rationalization with religion and the rise of capitalism, and saw the origins of both extreme rationalization and capitalism in the application of the rational and ascetic principles for the strict organization of all aspects of life previously restricted to monastic circles up to the period of the Renaissance in Europe. His thesis was that the dissolution of the monasteries had led to both the individualization of the principle of rationalization (as Protestantism, thrift and the accumulation of capital) and its secularization as the increasing organization, administration and control of society and the domination of nature. In an appendix to his Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (later published separately as Die rationale und soziologische Grundlagen der Musik, Tübingen, 1921;
part of, in Marxian terms, the dominant mode of production of capitalist society – that is, autonomous musical works, in spite of any other claims made for them to the contrary, are also produced, reproduced, exchanged, distributed and consumed as commodities.

In any attempt to decipher the 'meaning' of musical works and of music as a 'language' it needs to be understood that there is no one aspect of music which is 'meaningful' in itself. Its meaning derives entirely from its relation to a larger context or 'complex of meaning'. What Adorno is putting forward, therefore, is, to use his own term, more a 'constellation' of aspects of linguisticality in music than a systematic theory which privileges particular aspects over others.

Adorno resisted the traditional division between academic disciplines, arguing that 'the division of labour between disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, psychology and history is not contained in their material, but has been forced upon them from outside'. For this reason his work is difficult to categorize in conventional terms, and his shifting between disciplines has to be seen more as a constant changing of emphasis following the changing demands of his subject-matter than as the thorough-going pursuit of any one discipline in a positivist, functional sense. It is, nevertheless, useful to identify the orientation of his approach in the areas of sociology and philosophy in relation to the language-character of music. As a sociologist, drawing mainly on Weber and Marx, Adorno's concern was twofold: (1) to identify what he called the 'social content' of autonomous musical structures; and (2) to understand the social conditions of production, reproduction, distribution and consumption within which music functioned in highly industrialized Western societies – something which, incidentally, he never really pursued at any serious level of empirical enquiry. Thus in his sociology of music he

repr. 1972; translated as The Rational and Social Foundations of Music, ed. and trans. Don Martin-
dale, Johannes Riedel and Gertrude Neuwirth, Carbondale, 1958; repr. 1969), Weber developed the concept of rationalization specifically in relation to music. He examined the relation of melody to harmony, compared and contrasted Western and non-Western scales and tuning systems, looked at the development of polyphony in relation to notational systems, and considered developments in the technology of musical instruments. Weber suggested that the effects of this process were also to be seen in music, in terms of the rationalization of tuning systems, instrument technology, the development of complex notational systems and the complex polyphony that made possible the development of the orchestra, and of large-scale instrumental forms. See also Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904–5), trans. Talcott Parsons with a foreword by R. H. Tawney
(London, 1930; repr. 1971). The significance of Weber's pioneering effort towards an understanding of ways in which music and society are mediated in material terms was recognized early by Adorno, and came to occupy a central position in his music theory. The influence of Weber's theory of rationalization on Adorno is to be seen particularly in Dialektik derAufklärung (with Max Horkheimer; Amsterdam, 1947; GS, iii (1981); translated as Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming, New York, 1972; repr. London, 1979) and Philosophie der neuen Musik (Tübingen, 1949; GS, xii (1975); translated as Philosophy of Modern Music, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster, New York, 1973).


The term Gehalt can mean both 'content' and 'substance'. It therefore has a more 'material' sense than the English term 'content'. Thus gesellschaftlicher or sozialer Gehalt implies the 'substance' of society within musical material.

Adorno's work during his period of American exile with Paul Lazarsfeld on the Princeton Radio Project did involve empirical research. Nevertheless, as a true product of the speculative tradition of
identifies a conflict between the apparent ‘functionlessness’ of autonomous music and the context of social conditions within which it has no choice but to function (that is, as a commodity). As a philosopher, and drawing particularly on Kant and Hegel, his concern was to understand the contradictory nature of the logicality and rationality of musical structures in relation to the apparent ‘irrationality’ of expression. In fact, Adorno suggests that the sphinx-like character of autonomous musical works is the result of the tension between these two aspects – i.e. seeming to say something the precise meaning of which remains always concealed. In *Aesthetic Theory*, starting from Kant’s characterization of art in *The Critique of Judgement* as ‘purposefulness without a purpose’ (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*), Adorno suggests that

Art’s purposefulness without a practical purpose is what constitutes its similarity to language, while at the same time it is its lack of purpose, its functionlessness, which constitutes its non-conceptuality, its difference from significative language.\(^{11}\)

I should like now to pursue this antinomy, identified by Adorno as the tension between autonomous music’s inner purposiveness and its apparent outer purposelessness in terms of social function, through an examination of his use of the concepts of ‘mimesis’ and ‘rationality’.

**MIMESIS AND RATIONALITY**

Adorno suggests that the language-character of Western music has increased since it entered into the process of rationalization of society as a whole. In an article dating from 1953 on the relationship of philosophy and music (‘Über das gegenwärtige Verhältnis von Philosophie und Musik’), he writes:

It is the paradox of all music that, in its striving towards that freedom from intentionality for which the inadequate term ‘[pure] Name’ has been employed [as pure sound, the absolute unity of signifier and signified], it is nevertheless only through its participation in rationality in the broadest sense that it can unfold itself and develop. As sphinx it mocks the listener, in that it relentlessly promises meanings, and even intermittently offers them, while all the time such promised meanings are actually, in the truest sense, contributing towards the death of meaning.\(^{12}\)

Using Max Weber’s concept of ‘rationalization’,\(^{13}\) Adorno saw, for example, the development of multiple serialism in the 1950s as one extreme manifestation of a historical process of increasing rationalization in relation to musical material which could be traced back at least to the period of the Enlightenment in European music. At the same time he also saw in


\(^{13}\) See note 7 above for an account of Max Weber’s concept of rationalization.
the rational development of multiple serialism an attempt to eradicate completely the gestural and mimetic aspects of music's similarity to language.

In using the concept of mimesis in conjunction with that of rationality to define the polarities of musical form, Adorno was not returning to a literal understanding of the traditional aesthetic concept of mimesis as 'imitation of nature'. He used it instead in an almost anthropological, if not zoological or prehistorical, sense, as mimicking aspects of an often hostile environment in order to gain control of it or adapt to it, as a form of protection. Mimesis in this sense is akin to magic, and can also be understood as an earlier stage in the development of rationality itself. It contributes to music's expressivity through its language of gestures. The mimetic and magical aspects of art are retained residually in the material of the work of art, but are now integrated into (or, as Adorno sometimes puts it using Freudian terminology, sublimated by) the work's 'law of form' through the powerful historical tendency towards total rationalization.

Thus, using Adorno's dialectically opposed concepts of rationality and mimesis, the language-character of music could be further formulated in the following terms: (1) through the increasing process of rationalization and domination of all aspects of its material, music becomes highly systematic; and (2) through the survival within it of pre-rational, magical elements, music also functions on a mimetic, gestural level which resists systematization. These opposing aspects interact. That is to say, they are mediated within the structure of autonomous works – a mediation which also, according to Adorno, has a social dimension.

It is essential at this stage briefly to give some idea of what Adorno means when he talks of the 'social mediation of autonomous music', given that he emphasizes mediation at the level of production of the musical work, rather than at the level of reception or consumption. He stresses that society is 'sedimented' in autonomous musical structures, and that 'mediation' (Vermittlung) is to be understood as a dialectical process in the Hegelian sense, whereby opposites interpenetrate dynamically, leading to synthesis at a new level of form. This is to be understood here particularly in terms of the interaction of the expressive Subject and its previous objectifications as handed-down norms and conventions.

I suggest that one sense in which this can be understood is in terms of the mimetic and gestural quality of music's expressivity – the association of musical gestures with bodily gestures, and the further association of these with previous, extra-musical, functionality. Within the musical work these 'gestures' are no longer 'immediate', however. They are

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14 'Adorno's discussion of mimesis takes its starting point from a biological context. He considers mimesis to be a prehistorical or zoological version of mimesis.' Michael Cahn, 'Subversive Mimesis: T. W. Adorno and the Western Impasse of Critique', Mimesis in Contemporary Theory, i, ed. Mihai Spariosu (Philadelphia and Amsterdam, 1984), 27–64 (p. 33).

15 The term 'Subject' refers here to the Subject/Object relation of German Idealist philosophy. Within this tradition the relation between Subject and Object is seen as dialectical: the Subject partakes of objectivity and the Object of subjectivity. In relation to music, the expressive Subject can be understood as the composer or performer, and the Object, as 'previous objectifications' of the expressive Subject, can be understood as the handed-down musical material.
mediated through the logicality and rationality of the work's structure. In his Wagner book Adorno writes:

> It is no doubt true that all music has its roots in gesture . . . and harbours it within itself. In the West, however, it has been 'spiritualized' (vergeistigt) and interiorized (verinnerlicht) into expression, while at the same time the principle of construction subjects the overall flow of the music to a process of logical synthesis; great music strives for a balance of the two elements.\(^{16}\)

Another sense in which 'social mediation' can be grasped quite easily is in terms of genres, described by Dahlhaus as previously having come into being 'as a congruence between a social function and a compositional norm . . . [the] nexus of "external" social function and "internal" musical technique which tradition handed down to later composers'.\(^{17}\) Adorno argues that, although transcended in what he calls 'authentic' works (an important concept in terms of music's relation to truth),\(^{18}\) the social meanings and functions in which genres originated have left their traces within the socially functionless structures of autonomous music. He cites, for example, Wagner's complaint that one can still hear the clatter of dishes accompanying Mozart's music,\(^{19}\) and speculates on the origins of the formal and gestural characteristics of the Classical symphony and the sonata principle in lightweight 'entertainment' genres like the serenade and divertissement of the *galant* period. In these examples I think we can catch at least a glimpse of what Adorno means when he talks of the social content (gesellschaftlicher Gehalt) of musical structures. However, a number of confusions remain. Not least of these is a certain ambiguity contained in the concept of 'form' itself in Adorno's writings. This contradictory concept warrants closer examination in relation to different levels or 'layers' of musical meaning.

**UNIVERSALS AND PARTICULARS**

Adorno argues, typically, that formal categories need to be deduced from the material 'context of meaning' of actual musical works, rather than being imposed on works from the outside, as abstract formal categories of the traditional variety – i.e. those of the *Formenlehre*. Nevertheless, while criticizing such traditional formal categories Adorno does not dismiss them out of hand. They constitute, he maintains, one layer of meaning within musical works, albeit at a residual level – a level overlaid in Mahler, for example, by further layers of material which displace and contradict the handed-down genres and formal types to give them new


\(^{18}\) 'Adorno's notion of authenticity is founded on the idea of appropriate responses to the changing historically and socially mediated demands of the material of art. It thus at the same time operates as a critique of those ahistorical notions of authenticity which are based on ideas of unmediated "pure being" [Sein] or ultimate origins.' Paddison, 'Adorno's Aesthetic Theory', 366.

\(^{19}\) Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 48. See original German, GS xiii (1971), 46.
meaning through their new structural context. In *Mahler: Eine musikali-
sche Physiognomik* he writes:

In Mahler’s case the conventional abstract formal categories are overlaid with
the material ones. At times these become specifically the bearers of meaning,
while at other times the material formal principles also constitute themselves
beside or underneath the abstract ones which admittedly continue to
provide the scaffolding and to underpin the unity [of the work], but which
themselves no longer contribute to the musical context of meaning
(Sinnzusammenhang).20

Adorno sees form as a ‘force-field’ (*Kraftfeld*) of dynamic tensions, func-
tioning through polarities and operating simultaneously on different
levels. I suggest that the concept of form in Adorno can be clarified
through being understood as operating on two main levels: a universal
level and a particular level.

First, on what could be called a general or ‘universal’ level, form is a
fundamental attribute of the musical material itself. That is to say, Adorno
argues forcefully that musical material as available to the composer is
already ‘formed’ and is not the ‘natural’ raw material (*Rohstoff*) of the
popular imagination. The material is ‘pre-formed’ in the sense of being
historically and culturally mediated, as previous objectifications of the
expressive Subject: tonal schemata, formal types, genres, compositional
techniques, tuning systems and styles of performance make up the
handed-down material, rather than some notion of a natural ‘raw
material’ of sound. This level, although also important syntactically, is
where much of music’s hidden ‘referentiality’ is to be uncovered – its
semantics.

Behind this position there lies a longstanding debate on the relation
between technique and expression, and the nature of ‘artistic material’,
which dates at least from the 1890s and which was still continuing fiercely
well into the 1930s. It encompassed Valéry and the French Symbolist
poets, the Russian Formalist theorists, and it informs much of the so-
called ‘philosophical speculation’ in sections of Schoenberg’s *Har-
monielehre* (those sections omitted in the first English version). By the
late 1920s and early 1930s Adorno was engaged in an intensive debate
with the composer Ernst Krenek concerning the ‘historical dialectic of
musical material’, as he called it, in view of the recent development of the
12-note technique.21 At the same time Hindemith was developing his new
theory of harmony founded on the conviction – quite false, in Adorno’s
view – that the raw material of music was of purely natural origins.22

Second, on what could be called the ‘particular’ level, I suggest that
form is to be understood as the articulation, organization and re-


21 See Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Krenek, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Wolfgang Rogge (Frankfurt am
Main, 1974).

22 See Paul Hindemith, *Unterweisung im Tomsatz*, i: *Theoretischer Teil* (Mainz, 1937), translated
and Mainz, 1942). See also Adorno’s critique of Hindemith in ‘Ad vocem Hindemith: Eine
contextualization of available material by the expressive Subject to give it new meaning within the structural context of the individual composition. This is what, for Adorno, constitutes the 'cognitive' aspect of music, as an immanent quality in its structure. It is what he calls the process of 'second reflection' (zweite Reflektion) and likens to critical philosophical reflection, albeit as a form of 'cognition without concepts'. Although semantically also important, this level is primarily, in my view, syntactical.

Thus I argue that the concept of 'form' as Adorno uses it has to be understood as having two distinct but related senses: (1) as normative – i.e. in the sense of handed-down norms of musical behaviour, its conventionalized rhetorical gestures; and (2) as critical – i.e. in terms of deviation from formal norms to create new structures. The relation between these two levels of form is dynamic and progressive, but also, with the breakdown of the binding power of formal norms (as genres and tonal schemata), there is also a tendency towards disintegration. In Aesthetic Theory Adorno writes:

The individual work which subordinates itself to a genre does not do justice to it. It is more fruitful if there is a conflict between them. Historically, genre has gone through several phases: from legitimation (of old genres) to creation (of new ones) to destruction (of genres per se).23

Adorno's perspective is essentially that of the European avant-garde – at least, as it was up to the 1950s, and before the 'New Music' became itself a historical category. This is usually seen by his critics and commentators as a serious limitation on the general validity of his theory. Such an attitude is, I feel, itself rather blinkered, in that it goes along with the often-expressed view that Adorno's theory (particularly as a philosophy of history) functions simply as a narrow justification for the historical development of serialism.24 'This seems to ignore Adorno's own interesting attempt to sketch what he called a 'material theory of musical form' (eine materiale Formenlehre der Musik), an idea which is directly relevant to his notion of the language-character of autonomous music. It also ignores Adorno's argument that the loss of the binding power of handed-down genres, forms and tonal schemata, and their appropriation and commodification by the 'culture industry', has led to the emergence of a 'second mass musical language' (eine zweite musikalische Massensprache). Both of these ideas have a broader relevance.

MUSICAL MEANING AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF ABSOLUTES

Adorno sees it as crucial that any theory of 'meaning' in music should also confront the problem of the disintegration of absolutes, in terms of the

23 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 288. See original German, GS, vii (1970), 300.
24 In referring to Adorno's writings from the 1920s and early 1930s, for example, Michael de la Fontaine comments that '[t]he focus on Schoenberg is at this period already so strong that "material" in fact really means only that which prepared the way for dodecaphony' (de la Fontaine, 'Der Begriff der künstlerischen Erfahrung bei Theodor W. Adorno', Ph.D. dissertation, J. W. Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, 65, my translation). Lambert Zuidervaart considers that 'Adorno's concept of musical material holds less promise for the historiography and sociology of music in general than for one particular philosophy of some modern music [i.e. the Second Viennese
collapse of traditional norms of musical behaviour. Thus, in recognizing the
language-character of music, Adorno, as already discussed, also
argues the need for relative levels of universals and particulars – using the
terms in their philosophical rather than anthropological sense. As we
have seen, in one sense genres and formal types can play the role of
universals in relation to which individual works take their meaning as
particular deviations from or negations of such norms of musical
behaviour. However, these norms are always historical in character, says
Adorno – echoing, one suspects, Russian Formalist theorists like
Tynyanov,25 by whom it is almost certain he was influenced. Consequently
Adorno saw the need for a different level of universality through which to
understand the extreme particularity of radical modernist works. This
further level of universality had to contain categories of a very different
sort – categories which were flexible and able to make sense not only of
works which could be understood in relation to the traditional formal
categories and which were shaped in terms of notions of organic integra-
tion. It had also to be able to make sense of radical works which strove to
achieve their unity through fragmentation – and indeed in certain cases
which even sought to purge music of its ‘language-character’ altogether.
In a talk on musical analysis he gave in 1969, the year of his death,
Adorno put forward a set of categories on a different level of universality
from those of the traditional theory of form:

I might attempt to summarise or codify this universality in terms of what I
once defined as the ‘material theory of form in music’: that is, the concrete
definition of categories like statement (Setzung), continuation (Fortsetzung),
contrast (Kontrast), dissolution (Auflösung), succession (Reihung), develop-
ment (Entwicklung), recurrence (Wiederkehr), and however such categories may otherwise be labelled.26

And he concluded:

These [i.e. dialectical] categories are more important than knowledge of the
traditional forms as such, even though they have naturally developed out of
the traditional forms and can always be found in them.27

Starting from the conception of autonomous music as ‘language-like’,
both in terms of its gestural character and in terms of its logicality, Adorno
put forward the Hegelian categories of sameness (Gleichheit) and dif-
ference (Ungleichheit) as being the most fundamental to a theory of

25 Tynyanov, 'On the Problem of Musical Analysis', trans. and introduced by Max Paddison, Music
Analysis, 1 (1982), 169–87 (p. 185).
26 Ibid.
form. These categories can also be seen as a version of the identity/non-identity polarity of Hegelian logic, and can be understood as embracing the other main categories within his material theory of form – e.g. 'repetition' as 'return of the same', and 'contrast' as 'something different'. However, he points out that such categories are of little value in themselves, because they can be understood only within the context of the 'whole': that is, they are always mediated through the totality of the work's structure. In fact, what is most significant in the cognition of musical structures, he emphasizes, is the recognition of similarity (Ähnlichkeit). The unity-giving features of musical structures operate not simply in terms of 'repetition of the same' interspersed with 'contrast' in the architectonic sense, but in terms of infinitely subtle degrees of similarity – of difference in sameness and sameness in difference – mediated through each other and through the structure of the whole. What fascinated Adorno about musical syntax – and this is something brought out strongly in his analyses of Berg's music28 – was the idea of perpetual transition: that is, as he puts it in Aesthetic Theory, '... the determination of difference by a residue or “remnant” of sameness'.29

Adorno recognized that much avant-garde music took its meaning from the denial of meaning, in the sense that each individual work, through its own idiosyncratic approach to the problem of form, attempted to negate all residues of handed-down genres, forms and schemata in its material. This had resulted in an extreme form of nominalism, the ultimate isolation which autonomy had perhaps always implied, each work referring only to itself. At the same time, however, Adorno acknowledged the survival of 'heteronomous' residues, in spite of all, within even the most uncompromisingly radical and nominalistic works. He argued that there has always been a tendency for these elements, precariously held together within autonomous music's 'law of form', to revert to their previous heteronomous state. Today, given the historical/social context of consumption which characterizes late industrial society, all music acquires the function of commodity and tends to be heard in the context of theme tunes, or of music for films, television and advertising. He maintained that the gestures of autonomous music – and, unlike Adorno, I would argue that this should now also include the gestures of the radical avant-garde up to the 1960s – have now become part of a second, mass musical language through appropriation. This is made up, as Adorno put it as early as 1932 in his essay 'On the Social Situation of Music', of the 'ruins and external remains' of the previous musical culture.30 Thus he suggests (with more than a hint of regret) that the historical period when bourgeois music, as a form of 'conceptless cognition', was characterized by autonomy is now over. In Aesthetic Theory he writes:

29 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 204 (translation modified). See original German, GS, vii (1970), 212.
As a rule, ... authentic works cannot wipe out the memory that they originated in some heteronomous social purpose of the kind that underlines Beethoven’s drum rolls. ... The position of artists in society – to the extent to which they have any mass appeal – tends to revert to heteronomy after the age of autonomy has come to an end. Before the French Revolution artists were retainers: today they are entertainers.31

IN CONCLUSION

Predictably, this discussion of Adorno’s concept of the ‘language-character’ of music has turned into a discussion of form. This is because, so Adorno argues, it is through its form that music becomes ‘language-like’, and not through the symbolic value of its individual elements. While arguing that it is its similarity to language (Sprachähnlichkeit) which makes autonomous music ‘meaningful’ as a form of ‘conceptless cognition’, Adorno insists, nevertheless, that music is not language. Taking a position close to that of the Russian Formalists, he maintains that it is precisely through its difference from language that music is ‘meaningful’ – a difference which is defined through the autonomy of its form.

So, to summarize: form is understood by Adorno as antagonistic, as a ‘force-field’ of tensions. It is the dynamic and oppositional relation to received formal norms within the structure of the musical work which enables the work to speak. At the same time, however, the received norms, as musical material, also carry with them the ‘meanings’ associated with their previous functionality (whether as direct social function or as commodity). Thus, music is ‘meaningful’ and ‘language-like’ to the extent that this received, preformed musical content, already socially mediated, is recontextualized within the form and structure of the individual work. This process also serves to distance the material from its previous functionality, without, however, being able to destroy its ‘associative residues’. This is what Adorno has in mind when he refers to the work as a Sinnzusammenhang – a complex or context of meaning which goes beyond the technical structure of the work itself, and yet which is also inseparable from the work as concrete technical structure. In his essay ‘Fragment über Musik und Sprache’ (1956), Adorno writes:

Musical content (Inhalt) is in truth the profusion of all that which underlies musical grammar and syntax. Every musical phenomenon points beyond itself by virtue of the associations and expectations it arouses, and by virtue of that from which it distances itself. This transcendence of the single musical elements is what is usually meant by the term ‘content’ (Inhalt): i.e. ‘what is going on in the music’. But if musical structure and form are to be taken as more than didactic schemata, then they are not merely the external fence around the content, but are instead the content’s own definition or determination of itself as meaningful (als die eines Geistigen). Music can be called meaningful the more completely it defines itself [as form] – not merely because its single moments express something symbolically. Its similarity to language fulfils itself to the extent that it distances itself from language.32

31 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 359. See original German, GS, vii (1970), 376.
In predicting the end of the 'age of autonomy' in music and the rise of a second, mass musical language, with its second-order, iconic level of meaning, Adorno had understood early on the implications for so-called autonomous music, and for the radical avant-garde in particular, of the effects of new technological developments in a mass society. Furthermore, I suggest that the effects of the cultural pluralism and relativism which have come to characterize the period since the 1950s, and the 'new simplicity' and accessibility which have become such a feature of the music of the later part of the twentieth century, can also be interpreted in terms of Adorno's theory. From Adorno's perspective, such developments could be seen only as regressive, the reversion of the elements of musical material to their pre-rational, pre-autonomous condition. It could well be that a critical and self-reflective music today has had to give up the dream of a coherent and integrated, internally consistent musical language. In its place, it could be argued, there is, as material, only the used and the second-hand, the found objects from the cultural scrapheap. The problem of form, at what I have called the critical and oppositional (as opposed to normative) level in Adorno's theory, therefore now becomes acute. The difference, however, is that form can no longer be seen to 'grow' from the demands of the material, as in the organicist sense still implied in Adorno's thinking, and which to some extent perhaps accounts for his extreme cultural pessimism. As Samuel Beckett (to whom Adorno had intended dedicating his unfinished Aesthetic Theory) is reported to have said in relation to his novel How it is, 'the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. To find the form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.'

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