

## Improvisation (according to Adorno)

I would like to discuss the concept of improvisation by referring to a music theory text entitled *Vers une musique informelle*. It is a lecture given by Adorno in 1961 as part of the International Summer Course for New Music in Darmstadt. I have two reasons for choosing this text. Firstly, because it assumes a unique position in Adorno's oeuvre, in that it completely re-examines the concept of composition to such a point that it leads composition itself to its limits and, so my thesis, to improvisation — despite the fact that there are many indications that Adorno himself did not care very much for improvisation. The second reason is the complete lack of any improvisation-theoretical interpretations of Adorno's text. It will become evident that my interpretation stems from a specific understanding of improvisation as a technology of a constructive handling of the contingency of a musical space within its production.

1

Adorno's text analyzes and takes historical inventory of the conceptual perspective typical of the "New Music" tendencies current at his time. The text's critical tone towards these tendencies implies that Adorno is suggesting a new form of composition. The manifesto-like<sup>1</sup> talk of *musique informelle* thereby forms a model for an entirely Utopian-esque concept of composition. Its future Not-Yet, as Adorno states, is "a little like Kant's eternal peace, which he thought of as an actual, concrete possibility, which is capable as realization and yet is nevertheless an idea."<sup>2</sup> As the title suggests, Adorno is actually articulating nothing less than a new system of form. It is to provide the basic structure for a compositional technique of material immanence that discards external forms, yet, in being free from the heteronomous, still displays a vectorial tendency. Far from being relativistic, *musique informelle* is a way of composing that "should nevertheless constitute itself in an objectively compelling way, in the musical substance itself, and not in terms of external laws." In other words, this method of composing holds onto substance, but must "do away with the system of musical co-ordinates which have crystalized out in the innermost recesses of the musical substance itself". This gives way to a dialectical contradiction of form,

which highlights the fact that serial music's compositional nominalism, in its "rebellion against any general musical form, becomes conscious of its own limitations." One cannot achieve musical correlation without residues of formal cohesion. Yet, the latter's exteriority to the composition inevitably leads to a negative effect on any *integral* compositional work. The dialectics of informal music needs to work through precisely this contradiction, because in its course "the universal and the particular do not constitute mutually exclusive opposites." Put more clearly: "If informal music dispenses with abstract forms — in other words, with the musically bad universal forms of internal compositional categories — then these universal forms will surface again in the innermost recesses of the particular event and set them alight."

2

The program designed in this way is based on an investigation of the concept of time and an intentionality inherent in the perception of music. Such an endeavor necessarily leads to re-examining the question of unity or, better, how unity is received. "In traditional listening the music unfolds from the parts to the whole, in tune with the flow of time itself. This flow — that is to say, the parallel between the temporal succession of musical events and the pure flow of time itself — has become problematical and presents itself within the work as a task to be thought through and mastered."<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly enough, Adorno argues from a historical perspective when he places the historicity of the social against the immanent truth of the musical material, in order to introduce moments of a new, material-appropriate history. According to Adorno, the break with atonality to elaborate the twelve-tone technique coincides historically with "the conception of religiosity as return, together with the finger wagging admonition about learning to pray."<sup>4</sup> Both articulate the subjective desire for external form and the suppression of inner realities. "In both dimensions order is derived from the need for order and not from the truth of the matter."<sup>5</sup> This in turn leads to a naturalization of the external, in which music hypostasizes those elements that "appear natural and self-evident at the moment it is brought into being." But if

the epistemological step proposed here implies negating external form, and no longer reducing the explanation of that which is to be determined by the previously determined, what would be the alternative? Obviously, composing cannot retreat to spontaneous subjectivity, for “up to now every composer who has insisted on his own integrity and refused to compose in any way other than that suggested by his own spontaneous reactions, or who has rebelled against the constraints of the principles of construction, has failed miserably in his attempt to break fresh ground.”<sup>7</sup> To refer only to material, however, would be to surrender oneself to the reification of consciousness. Adorno defines his goal from this position: “The strategic task facing an informal music would be to break out of this double bind.”<sup>8</sup> Subjective spontaneity cannot be replaced by the ontology of the musical order of being. Nor, even worse, can subjectivity hold on to its nimbus as a producer of worlds. Instead, subjectivity itself is at stake: “In the tradition of Western nominalism art had always imagined that it could locate its enduring core and substance in the subject. This subject now stands exposed as ephemeral.”<sup>9</sup> In order not to lose oneself in reified expression, composition must renounce the purely affirmative subjectivity of the idealistic ego. This in turn affects the reality of musical material itself: “With the increasing mastery of the material the events at the subjective pole of music inevitably unsettle the opposite pole, the musical material itself.”<sup>10</sup> The point is that Adorno does not treat material as something “in and of itself” but defines it as going hand in hand with production. Material is that “which the composer operates and in which he works.”<sup>11</sup> This proves that the material cannot be thought of unhistorically: it is embedded in and is an expression of states of realization “of the technical productive forces of an age with which any given composer is inevitably confronted. The physical and historical dimensions mutually interact.”<sup>12</sup>

## 3

Ultimately, this is about designing a type of morphology—in the sense of a theory of form—that corresponds to the measure of the historically relevant material. Adorno’s text promises nothing less than a rationalization of those modes of composition that in the past referred to irrationality. And, just as morphology is not conceived on the basis of an idea but of material, the latter is not to be understood as a static reality. For Adorno, material-appropriateness is “more than contenting oneself with a craftsmanlike approach which aims at no more than the skillful manipulation of the means available, then materials themselves will be modified by the act of composition.” Because, the vectorial basis of the composition “is the energy which moulds the material in a process of progressively greater appropriateness.”<sup>13</sup>

But if identity and non-identity are placed in a differential relationship, if the identical derives from the non-identical, how is the relationship between composing and difference to be located? First and foremost, it must hold true that difference is connected with the criterion of explicitness in order to avoid relativism: “The demand for differentiated characters is necessarily associated with the call for clarity.”<sup>14</sup> This takes into account the fact that difference carries within it a tendency towards disorder, towards fragmentation, which must be reckoned with,

but which nevertheless shows itself as a means against any form of totalitarianism.

However, according to Adorno, composing today must be left to “complete differentiation” and yet remain committed to unity. Only from this dialectical movement can determination arise, which does not refer to a previously determined being (*Seiendes*): “Differentiation and clarity are combined together in specificity.” Precisely because each partial-element in its differentiation must always refer functionally and relationally to totality, it becomes clear that the “aversion to ornamentation is no mere idiosyncrasy but is grounded in the requirements of the contemporary technique of composition.” This disavows any idea of composition that postulates that it can derive the wholeness of a musical work from the naturalized properties of the individual tone. The insistence on the fact that “music consists not just of notes, but of the relations between them and that the one cannot exist without the other ... in turn makes necessary the transition to a *musique informelle*.”<sup>15</sup>

## 4

The aforementioned demands allying the question of composition with a concept of time that sees the objectification of truth as a process of moments. Not only is such an understanding of a composition’s truth closely related to the question of the future, that is, shaping the unpredictable or the indeterminate. It also raises the question of how to define what is compositionally undefinable or how to represent events that are not entirely representable. A form that enables the movement from which the form itself unfolds is somehow required. Of course we have to think of relation as a decisive category within the making of this form. But relation alone would be to “give shape, but nothing shaped results.”<sup>16</sup> That means that relationality like space is not in and of itself but can only function compositionally in a mix of patterns and series. *Musique informelle* compositions would then be vehicles of a non-representational truth, a form of world-production and not a work of illustration: their composition is what it is, solely by being brought into being: “This is the element of action in informal music.”<sup>17</sup> It must be assumed that what Adorno is describing here is nothing other than improvisation.

Improvisation is composition in real time, composing at the moment of production. It transforms the representational into the temporal form of a constantly updating, self-surprising world-production that lacks neither rationality nor relationality.

If the integrated compositional subjectivity is to contain truth, then it must constructively incorporate and bring into play the “tendency inherent in the material.”<sup>18</sup> But then how to understand subjectivity? Adorno refers here to the concept introduced by Hegel of “being there” (*Dabeisein*) as “the right of subjectivity to be present in the music itself, as the power of its immediate performance, instead of being excluded from it once it has been launched.”<sup>19</sup> This phrase modifies what could be defined as compositional meaning. Meaning can no longer be considered simply found. It is neither subjectively produced alone nor objectively objectified alone. Meaning becomes that which is produced, namely within a specific situation, at the specific point in time in its respective relations. Yet meaning is not

lost in relativism. It gains a legitimacy of purpose by the fact that it, through a mode of progressive perception by the “most progressive ears,” could be responded to at every moment as if it were its own desideratum.<sup>20</sup> But how to mediate meaning such as this? According to Adorno, the medium of this meaning should be grounded in the self-reflexiveness of musical experience “in such a way” that the latter “would present itself not as an object to be described, but as a force-field to be decoded.” Experiential action in force-fields, understood as such, does not allow for “false reliance on both an alien necessity and an alien chance, the surrogate for freedom.”

## 5

Here, however, is where the problem of Adorno’s universalist conception sets in. Adorno believes that the composers’ mediation of subject and material can be objectified in such a way that it can also be perceived by the recipient as their “own desideratum”. It should be noted that this condition implies two consequences. First, Adorno presupposes an objectifiability of the recipient’s subjectivity, which contradicts the promised emancipatory character of *musique informelle*. Second, Adorno completely ignores the question of musicians. This is surprising. Because, if Adorno’s postulation is thought completely through, it’s absolutely essential to consider those, and especially those, whose experiences are what first and foremost determine the production of the work in the first place — the musicians performing it.

According to Adorno, experience should merge into totality. Which is precisely what the discussion concerning subject involvement in the aesthetic “being there” (*Dabeisein*) is about. Juliane Rebentisch<sup>21</sup> rightly pointed out how Adorno’s terminology of experience (to return to Hegel) clearly differs from Kant’s. According to Kant, all those who participate in the *sensus communis* can “have a comparable experience in terms of structure.”<sup>22</sup> However, in Hegel’s concept of *Dabeisein*, subjects converge in such a way that they “participate aesthetically in the presence of the entire subject.”<sup>23</sup> The conditions of a possible utopia of emancipation evolves from the “supra-individual subjectivity of autonomous art”<sup>24</sup> as a We, “indeed all the more so the less the artwork adapts externally to a We and its idiom.”<sup>25</sup> The subject is virtually drawn into society, committed to universality in order to gain validity at all. Yet, in composition as a work of art, a quasi-subjectivity appears as a form of subjectivity that rises above individual meaning towards the universal. The composer therefore produces music “by transcending it through self-restraint: objectively transposing it into the work of art.”<sup>26</sup> This explains why Adorno’s path to improvisation — which *musique informelle*’s methodology announces in principle — is closed. According to Adorno, improvisation would only be a symptom of an era of “ego weakness” (*Ichschwäche*).<sup>27</sup> Just as Adorno insists on “a subjectivity liberated from claims to domination and self-subjugation”, he misdeals by adhering to a universal, supra-individual truth of the work and concludes at the subject as “governor of the social entire subject.”<sup>28</sup>

Against this background, the category error is revealed in the title itself. Speaking of the informal is, in reality, speaking of the formless. However, as the interpretation of the text shows, Adorno’s aim is not to emphasize the

informal, but to deal with a form — a form that at the same time emerges from and invokes movement instead of closing movement in a frozen state. As is well known, Adorno based his entire theory on the assumption, which he himself formulated, that “utopia is blocked by the real functional order.”<sup>29</sup> Adorno accepted the impossibility of changing practice to legitimize the negative dialectic, which again he himself formulated, and took this blocking as specifically historical, evidence that determines the current situation as a basis to “call for the abolition of practice, of production for production’s sake, of the universal cover for the wrong practice.”<sup>30</sup> In light of these terms, it is more than astonishing that Adorno, on the one hand, suggests a utopian moment of changing practice in the medium of musical composition and, on the other hand, teleologically backfills that very practice in a relapse into the representational. And this is where reflecting on improvisation should start.

[Translated by Laura Bruce from “Improvisation (bei Adorno),” in *Musik & Ästhetik*, issue 02 / April 2018.]

## Notes

- 1 Adorno, Theodor W., “Vers une musique informelle.” Trans. Rodney Livingstone. In: *Quasi una Fantasia*. London: Verso 1992, pp. 269–322. “I have coined the French term ‘musique informelle’ as a small token of gratitude towards the nation for whom the tradition of the avant-garde is synonymous with the courage to produce manifestoes.” (p. 272)
- 2 Ibid., pp. 272–273. Also the following 5 quotes.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 271 f.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 274–275.
- 5 Ibid., p. 275.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., p. 277.
- 8 Ibid., p. 278.
- 9 Ibid., p. 280.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., p. 281.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 282–283.
- 14 Adorno, Theodor W., “Criteria of New Music.” Trans. Rodney Livingstone. In: *Sound Figures*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999, pp. 188–189. Also the next 3 quotes.
- 15 Adorno, Theodor W., “Vers une musique informelle.” Trans. Rodney Livingstone. In: *Quasi una Fantasia*. London: Verso 1992, p. 299.
- 16 Ibid., p. 304.
- 17 Ibid., p. 317.
- 18 Ibid., p. 319.
- 19 Ibid., p. 320.
- 20 Ibid., p. 321. Also the following 3 quotes.
- 21 Juliane Rebentisch, *Die Liebe zur Kunst und deren Verknennung, Adornos Modernismus*, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, Vol. 52, Dec. 2003, “Liebe,” [www.textezurkunst.de/52/die-liebe-zur-kunst-und-deren-verknennung-adornos/](http://www.textezurkunst.de/52/die-liebe-zur-kunst-und-deren-verknennung-adornos/) (accessed Jan. 8, 2018).
- 22 Ibid.