

Theodor Adorno

Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music.
 trans. Rodney Livingstone.
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As the volume of Adorno's writings in English translation increases, the more difficult it becomes to read him. He may well come to demand a re-reading; (first and foremost from the jazz enthusiasts). Though numerous aids to understanding Adorno have long been available to English speaking readers in the short-circuiting form of poor translations, Rodney Livingstone's adroit and, on occasion, eloquent transposing of Adorno's justly infamous prose properly impedes any rash attempt to actually hold it fast. *Quasi una Fantasia* is, now in English, the demand for a new, improvisatory interpretation.

Quasi una Fantasia originally appeared in German in 1963. It is the second of what would become three collections of Adorno's shorter works on music. The other two collections, *Klangfiguren* and the posthumous *Musikalische Schriften* have not been translated, though Adorno's three monographs on individual composers are now, as they say, available in English: *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link* (1991), *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (1992), and Livingstone's own 1981 translation of Adorno's *Versuch über Wagner*, unfortunately titled *In Search of Wagner*. Adorno seems to have regarded his 1948 book, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* as the central text of his musical writings (he also considered it an excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). But as fate of course has it, the translation of *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (improbably configured as *Philosophy of Modern Music*), is more or less abysmal. However, since Adorno construed the three collections on music as consisting of 'reflections' upon the 1948 book (and indeed this later collection contains contributions on each of the two composers, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, who are the subject of the earlier book), *Quasi una Fantasia* may be poised as that which might well rescue the earlier, pivotal text. This of course possible only in English.

Adorno's book, despite its wholly fabricated English subtitle, does not consist of essays in modern music. (More than half of the 14 pieces in this collection began as lectures or radio talks; and the texts of three of these talks were unpublished before their publication in *Quasi una Fantasia*.) The composition of *Quasi una Fantasia* instead obeys the imperative of its title, the key to which is perhaps to be found in the writings collected therein under the name 'Motifs' (which consists of some three or four dozen aphorisms selected by Adorno from his journalism music criticism, published between 1927 and 1951): 'Whereas Beethoven takes the cadenza, the last vestige of the freedom to improvise, and subjects it to the composer's subjective intentions, freedom nowadays is strictly required of the interpreter in order to soften the strictness of the interpretation which is specified by the freedom of the composition' (9). Beethoven's two sonatas (p. 27) are titled *quasi una fantasia*. So too therefore is the first, and introductory, piece in the collection not an essay but a fragment on the relation between music and language. Music comes to resemble language only by distancing itself from it, especially its intentionality and

conceptuality; 'To interpret language means: to understand language. To interpret music means: to make music' (3). The imperative of Adorno's title, like making rather than reproducing, is a mythic attempt—by strictly following the prescribed freedom of Beethoven's composition (to say nothing of mimicking it literally)—to liberate itself from the spell of music precisely by subjecting itself to it. *Quasi una Fantasia* is a collection of subjections to music that reverberate in linguistic interpretations whose shape obeys rhythm and dissonance, counterpoint and the sound of the drum: 'Is the drum the successor of human sacrifice or does it still sound the command to kill? In our music it resounds as an archaic survival. It is the legacy of violence in art, the violence which lies at the base of all art's order. While as a spiritualized activity art strips violence of its power, it continues to practice it' (34).

Livingstone's translation doesn't always appreciate the dialectical nuances of subjection and determination. He renders the title of the essay *Musikalische Warenanalysen* as 'Commodity Music Analysed' (rather than 'Musical Commodity-Analysis'), which is to suggest that certain musical forms are already reified commodities waiting to be analyzed by the music critic. (It is difficult to sustain such a static, consistent notion of commodity music in the midst of an essay that respects no distinction whatsoever between Guy Lombardo's 'Penny Serenade' and Rachmaninov's Prelude in C-sharp minor.) This is to ignore in Adorno's title the contrary suggestion that it is the music itself, via a subjection to it, that performs its own (and thereby also enables) interpretation. Indeed, it may well be that it is thanks to the very commodification of music that the best performance of a critical analysis of that same music is possible, as in Adorno's evocation here of the knowledge and self-realization afforded by kitsch: 'The positive element of kitsch lies in the fact that it sets free for a moment the glimmering realization that you have wasted your life' (50). This explains the distaste, or perhaps more so, the taste for kitsch.

Adorno's essay on Bizet's opera *Carmen*, entitled '*Fantasia sopra Carmen*', reveals that the subjective register in which music impresses itself is anything but personal and idiosyncratic. That register is instead, just as it is in the tradition of Schiller's aesthetics, the place where nature and freedom, those most ideally objective of all things, are to be configured. And this most subjective figuration of what ought to be most objective is likewise revealing of the function of the music that performs, and thereby delivers the figuration: 'Carmen's fatalism, this gesture of alienation, the sacrifice of every assertion of the right to dominate, is one of those figures of reconciliation which have been vouchsafed to humanity. It is a promise of finite liberty. The prohibition on transcendence destroys the illusion that nature is anything more than mortal. This is the precise function of music in *Carmen*' (63). In short, *Carmen*, this most cultural of cultural goods, negates the founding premise of culture: its ability to transcend the mortal facticity of the everyday. *Carmen*, if we're lucky, rescues us from the ideology of culture, from that which promises to save us.

The middle third of the book consists of four pieces on composers: Mahler, Zemlinsky, Schreker, and the aforementioned Stravinsky. As to the Mahler piece—or more correctly: pieces, since Adorno notes in his preface to the second German edition (1963) of the Mahler book that *Quasi una Fantasia* contains two texts on Mahler: one a memorial address delivered in 1960 (which was formulated after the completion of the

Mahler book), and the other entitled '*Epilegomena*' (translated here as 'Afterthoughts'), both of which he offers as 'additional and complementary material to the book.' The two Mahler texts here are thus in substance distinct enough from the monograph to have induced Adorno not to include them in subsequent editions of the monograph. 'Stravinsky: A Dialectical Portrait' is a profound reflection on both his music and Adorno's earlier extensive critique of it. The dialectic herein registers at once both the objective nature of Adorno's prior criticism and the historically transient nature of musical form: 'If dissonance was once the expression of subjective suffering, its painful aspect now becomes the mark of social compulsion' (157).

The penultimate piece in the collection, 'Music and New Music', explains what Adorno means by that term; the final essay, '*Vers une musique informelle*', is a manifesto for the sound of music. In general, or rather particularly, a book for listening.

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