MUSIC “PUSHED TO THE EDGE OF EXISTENCE” (ADORNO, LISTENING, AND THE QUESTION OF HOPE)

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That art stands as a reminder of what does not exist, prompts rage.
—Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory

Hope is not confidence. Hope is surrounded by dangers, and it is the consciousness of danger and at the same time the determined negation of that which continually makes the opposite of the hoped-for object possible.
—Ernst Bloch [in conversation with Adorno], “Something’s Missing”

PROLOGUE

These days it’s often nearly as difficult to escape music as it is to close one’s ears to sound generally. Or, to state the matter more directly, wherever there’s commerce—and commerce is everywhere (in the public selling of goods, ideologies, subjectivities, identities)—there’s music to help grease the skids of attraction. Music promises good times as you prepare to part with your coin, whatever you’re buying or buying into. Given the virtually sacred nature of late capitalism’s secular materialism, the ritual of selling is rampant over-determined, and here music plays a fundamental role, no matter the product and without regard to whether the consumers are presumed to be the de facto proles, on the lower end of the social spectrum, or the Quality, on the upper end. As it were, pretty much everyone has music in his or her ears throughout the exchange process. The ubiquity of music in commerce, broadly conceived—in a postindustrial world defined by commerce—engenders repetition on a vast scale, more and more of the same so long as it sells, like sitcom spin-offs...
gone cosmic: interchangeable music Clearly Channeled into a would-be mass consciousness, as though life were lived within the confines of a global elevator outfitted with surround sound. Positive social effects pretty much go begging, so the story goes. Decades ago, Theodor Adorno diagnosed and predicted all this, repeatedly, and to the considerable consternation of music lovers of nearly every bent.

But things aren’t quite that simple, and in particular not for Adorno. Indeed, though Adorno is commonly (if carelessly) charged with unrelenting pessimism, at the very heart of his sustained and often bitter critique of modernity there lies fundamental hopefulness, if not precisely optimism, conceived within the context of art’s role—music especially—in providing the wherewithal to imagine social utopia. But for Adorno to imagine a better reality, the actuality of the present dystopia must be directly confronted.

In about 1934 Adorno drafted an essay called “Music in the Background,” so aphoristically brief that it might be taken almost as an afterthought. Anecdotal and (atypically) almost conversational in tone, the text hints at a foundation for hope, but indirectly. Adorno describes the everyday, utterly ordinary—and indeed clichéd—live entertainment music typical of 1930s European cafés and pubs, music that for the time served a similar function to the most ritualistically commercial musics of today. Adorno’s concern, in essence, was music in a state of ruins, whose sounds he nonetheless pursued with both determination and sadness.

He opens the essay with a series of images of music—or, perhaps better, of musical life—now silenced in the administration and bustle of mundane existence. If one sings aloud on the street there’s the risk of being arrested as a disturber of the peace; if one hums while in the car, the very lack of attention to the task of (hectic) driving may produce an accident. In short, “If you are looking for music, you have to step outside the space of immediate life, because it no longer is one, and find the lost immediacy where it costs the price of admission, at the opera, at a concert” (Adorno 2002b, 506). In the 1930s Adorno “heard” the silencing of music—except in the sanctioned venues of high bourgeois art—at a time when the phonograph and the radio were already well established as the foundation for musical mass culture. Modern life as he perceived it was unmusical, and the only way to recoup the loss was to see that life
restaged, on museumlike historical display, and in designated, official-culture performance sites. The exceptions proved the rule.

Our present-day situation leaves us very little silence to “hear”; music in particular is virtually inescapable. And the effects at the heart of Adorno’s concern are the same: repetition (a complement to ubiquity), as Jacques Attali reminds us, is a form of silence—and silencing (Attali 1985, 87–132).1 At this point in his essay Adorno takes an unexpected turn, to the extent that he identifies places where ordinary musical life (a type of commerce-music) holds on, places which he clearly valorizes: the café and the bar. As he puts it, “exiled Music herself, pushed to the edge of existence, holds out loyally there: music as background” (Adorno 2002b, 506) Here (live) music still “belongs”; “it may have been shooed off the street, but not to the distant reaches of formalized art.” It lives in the background—you don’t have to bother listening—but it maintains a presence nonetheless as accompaniment to conversation. The people within the music’s earshot do not constitute an audience; nor, for that matter, are they in what Adorno terms a “musical mood.” Indeed, the music’s “first characteristic” is that “you don’t [even] have to listen to it.” And yet the music does something; music and people are “caught up and bound together”; “it keeps the customers company” (507)—and perhaps momentarily happy.2

Adorno hears in live-performance café music the remnant of a musical life without the self-consciousness of Art (writ large) or, for that matter, the administered goods variously distributed through the reach of the culture industry. Well, not quite. Musically, there’s nothing original, just pared down arrangements of stuff likely first intended for an orchestra. As music, its lifeblood is the cliché; it’s been heard before, many times. As he explains, it’s not much, but it’s something, a something evident in the music’s absence when the tune concludes or the set ends. When café music falls silent, its loss is instantly apparent; “It sounds as if a miserly waiter is turning off a couple of electric bulbs” (508).

The limits of what we’re hearing are tightly circumscribed: “The café arranges bouquets of dead flowers” (508). In our own time, consider the potpourris of classic hits that interpellate would-be store customers—or “guests,” in current deceitful business parlance—by invoking the imagined core of our identities via sonorically induced
nostalgia and, no doubt, melancholy. Adorno minces few words on the nature of the appeal: “If our art music lingers in the comforting realm of Orpheus—here its echo sounds from Euridice’s mournful region.” In the café, Adorno suggests, what we will hear, should we choose to listen to the background, are acoustic ruins, yet ruins awakened to “new, ghostly life.” The music-in-ruins “lights up” those who hear it, even though its glow is “netherworldly” (509).

Adorno encapsulates late modernity’s sorry remnant of enlightenment ideals via the metaphor of paltry electric illumination: “Background music is an acoustic light source” (508). It illuminates, however dimly, what might have been. For Adorno, the potential realization of “what might have been” marks the socially hopeful possibility (or threat) of conjuring from auditors a social critique, however vague, of the very conditions (antimusical to the core) that produce the musical ubiquity of Muzak and its aftermath in the first place. Let’s be clear: the social critique that Adorno imagines carries minimal threat to the status quo, on account of the fact that listeners are not being introduced to the music as anything new: no demands are made on them and especially none necessitating conscious thought. What’s given is simply the same-old; the music quoted connects to memory that it’s there to soothe and stroke, eliciting the “emotional calm” characteristic of predictability. And, with luck, to encourage its auditors to fork over. There’s no way around the conflicted nature of this dialectic of late-modern musical reception. Nowadays we may enter the Gap or Abercrombie and Fitch to buy a shirt, but if we cathex to whatever bit of the playlist that accompanies our movements—a playlist we’re already likely to know—the CD compilation is available for purchase, seasonally adjusted to coincide with the merchandise that’s offered, as part of the Gesamtkunstwerk of the shopping experience.

But there’s more, as it were, a remainder. Whatever the grim reality of the metaphoric affinity between music and the myriad rhetorics of everyday life under the conditions defined by late capital, music, however debased—and indeed, however potentially debasing—still points to something better. This is what informs Adorno’s insight that background music is an acoustic light source illuminating what might have been. Put differently, the presence of music—any music—references a lack. And lack, properly understood,
is not an ontological condition but a social one. Lack, in other words, invites critique; critique in turn is the precondition for social change.

MUSIC AS SUCH IN MUSICAL THOUGHT

The social impact of music has been endlessly claimed since the dawn of Western history. In particular, as is very well known, social conservatives—from Plato to the neoplatonist Alan Bloom, among a substantially larger host—have looked with suspicion on music—all music. They insist that music is more than entertainment, that it shapes society. The trick, as they see it, is to make music effective principally as a (properly masculinized) agent of prevailing orders of power, the State especially. Plato’s account of music’s enervating force on the male (the female being of little interest to him), endlessly repeated by close paraphrase thereafter to the present, fundamentally equates musical “excess,” for example, with masturbation—to borrow from the prevailing metaphor in Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove, the loss of “precious bodily fluids,” the essence as it were of masculinity itself. Thus Plato (as the voice of Socrates):

Then when any man lets music flute his soul away, and pour flooding into his mind through his ears, as through a funnel, those sweet and soft and mournful melodies which we have described, till he spends his whole life piping and cloying himself with sound, that man at first tempers the spirited element in him, as steel is tempered, and makes it useful instead of useless and hard; but if he continues without ceasing to beguile that element, after a time he begins to dissolve and melt it away, till he pours out his spirit in a stream, cuts as it were the sinews of his soul, and makes of it a “feeble warrior.” (Plato 1957, 118)

And Bloom, who for good measure considerably outdoes Plato via a seething flow of images incorporating solo sex, cross-dressing, and parental murder, together the result of a kid having the wrong tunes in his ears:

Picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and
leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind . . .
And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body
throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in
hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition
is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes
the music. In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepack-
aged masturbational fantasy. (Bloom 1987, 74–75)

And so on. These social conservatives, whatever their moral panic
regarding the dystopian potential of music, got it distinctly correct
that music matters at the level of social formation and its main-
tenance. Their concern, unlike mine, was to enshrine a status quo
whose interests were, and continue to be, underwritten by some-
thing less than the “democracy” Bloom predictably invokes in his
book’s title. What I’m after develops from the same insight but leads
in a different direction. My concern is the hope that music posits
for a society that one now can only imagine rather than experience,
a society, to use Ernst Bloch’s characterization, perceived as “if only
it were so” (Bloch and Adorno 1988, 3; and Adorno 1997, 105). As
Adorno succinctly put it, “The promise contained in the age-old
protest of music [is] the promise of a life without fear” (1981b, 156);6
and, as a corollary, “A priori, prior to its works, art is a critique of
the brute seriousness that reality imposes upon human beings. Art
imagines that by naming this fateful state of affairs it is loosening
its hold” (Adorno 1992c, 248, emphasis added). I will develop my
argument concerning music and hope not around any particular
example but around a social philosophy of music as such—and with
the understanding that music, to be understood, to be able “to speak”
its protest, needs philosophy.7

My principal claim is that music is the Other, not the other of
silence, but the other of the nonmusic and the antimusic of social
relations. Music registers itself as a difference, as it were, as an alter-
native to nonmusical life—nonmusical life meant both as neutral fact
of existence and, more to the present concern, as a dystopian real-
ity in which music is, in ironic actuality, virtually inescapable. The
stakes of the claim are high. To speak in general terms: Adorno sug-
ests that “every artwork is an instant; every successful work is a
cessation, a suspended moment of the process, as which it reveals
itself to the unwavering eye” (Adorno 1997, 6). That is, art seemingly,
momentarily, stops time. It interrupts the dystopian “progress,” the backward march that incessantly claims forward movement.8 This “moment” gives access to a time that does not yet exist but that someday might: utopia. In short, music as such, even in its own common ordinariness and inescapability, signals a difference from—more, an opposition to—what otherwise passes as the ordinary and the expected. Music posits the sonoric possibility of something better; “An ‘it shall be different’ is hidden in even the most sublimated work of art” (Adorno 1992a, 92).9

At the same time however, every instance of the artwork fails in its effort. It offers appearance, rather than the “real thing.” “Art,” Adorno points out, “is [only] the semblance of what is beyond death’s reach” (Adorno 1997, 27). As a product of a world awry, the perfection it attempts will necessarily always elude it. But it is precisely in the attempt—exercised in hopeful desperation, one might say—to imagine something different that the reality of the illusion can be appropriately certified: “Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience” (Adorno 1997, 4). Yet artworks are caught in the very web whose bind they seek to transcend: “there is no artwork that does not participate in the untruth external to it, that of the historical moment” (Adorno 1997, 347). And this untruth marks the perpetual failing of art to attain the Absolute for which it nonetheless perpetually strives.10

Modernity is marked by the principle of accumulation—possession. Possession defines both subjectivity and identity, just as it serves as the organizing principle of the material economies through which subjects are realized. Within this context, music’s sublime, the root of its utopian promise, lies in the materiality of its immaterial essence. That is, music is the result of social practice; it “happens” through (embodied) labor. And yet at heart music cannot be either grasped or held onto, despite its being “made,” and despite its being made “tangible” as a product. In the most fundamental sense, music resists being possessed.11 Music—ironically highly commercialized, fully incorporated into the exchange economy—refuses the very principal upon which modernity depends: ownership. Music invariably slips from reach. Literally. Our hold on it lasts only so long as
its sounds remain audible. Its only permanence (the defining principle of possession) is its impermanence. Consider the dim regret we feel when a piece of music we love ends. We want to hear it again, even knowing that a rehearing will produce the same result. We will re-experience the regret that it’s “over,” and that its being over is so complete. Dissatisfied satisfaction.

Ironically, music evokes the very spirituality (immateriality) upon which modernity feeds as the loss leader for keeping things just the way they are. That is, music spiritualizes, but music also is given to play the game of spiritualizing—aestheticizing—the sanctity of possession, the very principle against which it proclaims its difference. But its co-opting is never complete. Music plays along, but under protest, which ever threatens to break into the open. Whatever the degree of music’s sonic affirmation of society-as-it-is, music’s otherness remains insistent, if often disguised. Music’s soul stands in the shadows, ever ready for its moment to break through to the light. Plato knew all this. Plato feared music, and with good reason.

Adorno regarded art as the repository for the faint semblance of a social happiness otherwise unavailable; at the same time he insisted that art could not provide what society denied. “Art,” as he put it, “is the ever broken promise of happiness” (Adorno 1997, 136). The faint trace of art’s broken promise could be seen, if only as a shadow, even in debased art. Take kitsch. Adorno insisted that “every great, authentic piece of musical kitsch . . . is capable of acting as the accompaniment to imaginary catastrophes” (Adorno 1992e, 16). His telescoped sentence is semantically slippery, though his claim expresses the seriousness he accords to kitsch, which, as he understands it, comes in varieties of greater and lesser, authentic and inauthentic, all of it semiotically underscoring danger. Adorno is eliciting the reality of the truth in the lie, that is, that the truth of kitsch is its falseness, which every “authentic” example represents before all else. The precise truth of the lie is the actual catastrophe, which the kitsch-work accompanies, rather like the blindfold offered the man about to be shot: the blindfold visually confirms what the optics of the victim’s masked eyes can no longer physiologically project onto the retina. The blindfold is felt on the skin as a preview of the absolute darkness into which its wearer is about to be transported.

Adorno commented that “kitsch contains as much hope as is
able to turn the clock back. It is the depraved reflection of that epiphany which is vouchsafed only to the greatest works of art” (Adorno 1992b, 43). Nor was kitsch precisely the antithesis of great art: “Kitsch is not, as those believers in erudite culture would like to imagine, the mere refuse of art, originating in disloyal accommodation to the enemy; rather, it lurks in art, awaiting ever recurring opportunities to spring forth” (Adorno 1997, 239, emphasis added). Kitsch—even kitsch—evokes a future utopia, but only by looking back at a past that is selectively (mis)remembered, thereby helping to stabilize the status quo toward which kitsch is otherwise deeply antagonistic. Kitsch, for Adorno, fundamentally evokes the momentary self-imposition of exile from the present. Yet in the effort by kitsch to forget the present, the past is remembered: history is evoked, but misleadingly. Hence, the progressive element in kitsch is its insistence that the past matters (despite the claims authorized by modernity’s mantra of progress that the past is irrelevant). Were the present less painful, the lie of kitsch would be less insistent. That is, the aporia of modernity leads us to seek consolation in place of what appears to be the impossibility of reconciliation with the otherness—the condition of general estrangement—that we at once ironically desire and abhor. “The positive element of kitsch,” Adorno bitterly noted, “lies in the fact that it sets free for a moment the glimmering realization that you have wasted your life” (1992b, 50). Even so, this insight makes space for the principle of hope.

Ernst Bloch, whose influence on Adorno’s thinking on art, kitsch, and hope was considerable, often discussed kitsch and a variant, colportage (in reference to itinerant bookseller or colporteur common in Europe from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries who hawked a wide variety of books—bibles, cookbooks, medical books, fairy tales, what we would recognize as pulp fiction, and so on) (Bloch 1988d, xxxvii). He recognized in kitsch and colportage what he termed “a yearning . . . that is itself not nonsensical, even though it is shrill and fraudulent, cheap and uncontrolled” (1988b, 181).

I embrace Adorno’s and Bloch’s insistence that kitsch can function as a repository for hope (however faint), evinced from an awareness (however unreflexive and dim) of the truth of its lie, because I wish to insist on the significance of music as such to the delineation of its own otherness from mundane, nonmusical (ironically
all-too-musical) life. My concern is music—period. That is, I am not building my argument about hope on the distinction between music high or low, nor of good music versus bad, however we might sort that out the latter, though the distinction is obviously important (Adorno more or less spent his entire life addressing the question). I am suggesting instead that the singular distinction of good or bad gains relevance precisely because the phenomenon of music as such is prior and fundamental alike to the real or imagined well-being of society and its subject-inhabitants: important, as it were, without specific regard to self-reflexive consideration of aesthetic or other “qualities.” Thus, I do not believe that the potential social utopianism of music resides solely in what we might choose to call “socially engaged” or “socially progressive” music. However inadvertently, even the musically debased can lay some claim to social utopianism on account of the fact that it is, simply, music. All music, that is, like art generally, constitutes what Bloch aptly terms “anticipatory illumination” [sichtbarer Vor-Schein] (1988e, 73; and 1988a), a phrase that resonates with Adorno’s metaphor in “Music in the Background” likening music to the light from an incandescent bulb.

Adorno insisted on music’s “theological dimension,” which he located in music’s relation to the absolute: “Its Idea is the divine Name which has been given shape. It is demythologized prayer, rid of efficacious magic. It is the human attempt, doomed as ever, to name the Name, not to communicate meanings” (1992f, 2). Music, he suggests, “says” something, but what it says is at once revealed and concealed. This insight is critical to the social foundations of the argument I’m advancing. Late modernity, as a distorted by-product of the Enlightenment, is defined by the positivisms of instrumentalyzed reason, ubiquitously repeated in the fully naturalized parlance of everyday relations embedded in communications lingo: “headline news,” “factoids,” “sidebars,” “get to the point,” “the bottom line,” “time is money,” and the like. What this interlocked web of presumed “objectivity” assumes is that everything worth knowing is available in quantifiable form: as fact (“information” in distinction from knowledge). What cannot be assigned the absolute status of facticity is ignored, deemed insignificant, or, alternately, denounced as significant only on account of the immanent danger arising from the “remainder” that cannot with certainty be contained
or appropriated within the parameters of “pure” objectivity (which in reality is seldom either pure or objective). Music is a commodity, more now than ever before, at the same time music’s commodification is incomplete. And it is precisely music’s quality of possessing a remainder beyond its prevailing identity with the here and now—the beyond that Adorno called the nonidentical—that has rendered music suspicious since the ancients began worrying about it. Moreover, it is precisely the nonidentical nature of music’s social situation that defines music’s centrality to life lived under prevailing conditions of nonliving, as reflected, for Adorno, most obviously in the labors and products of the culture industry, in allegiance with the now-globalized economies and nation-states that run in parallel with its premises.

A corollary: the coercive pressures exerted on musicians throughout history to adhere to the established conventions have become increasingly ironic in late modernity. By definition, the modern artist must at least give the impression of subverting the rules in order to lay claim to the originality that lies at the very foundation of individuality. The artist defines—and is anticipated to define—the most individual of individualities, but in doing so lays claim to a subversiveness that may threaten the well-guarded boundaries of a society of other individuals whose “individuality” in fact is mass produced, and must be mass produced if the dominant ideological matrix is to perform its critically supportive role in the material economy.

My point, then, is this: virtually everything about music—the music “itself,” the musicians who make it, and the myriad practices that Christopher Small aptly calls musicking (Small 1998)—possesses a distinctly real potential for subversion, however modest, of the status quo, and everyone knows it. To nail down, measure, and hence control music’s potential for subversiveness requires a great deal of effort, effort all too willingly attended to by the highest levels of both government authority and industry, whether state-authorized composers’ unions, congressional oversight committees, record companies’ ever-nervous advertising departments, or what have you.

[Theorists of totalitarianism] have all explained, indistinctly, that it is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality: a concern
for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody, a distrust of new languages, codes, or instruments, a refusal of the abnormal—these characteristics are common to all regimes of that nature. (Attali 1985, 7)

But also, in point of fact, common as well to now-dominant “liberal” market societies, where—small irony—the subversive, in the spirit of Bataille, all too easily is transformed into highly marketable “subversiveness,” nowadays the sine qua non for virtually every imaginable marketing scheme, from fashion to automobiles, in addition to music itself.

**PHILOSOPHY**

Adorno often commented on the myriad failings of Western philosophy—this was the indictment of his *Negative Dialectics*—as part and parcel of modernity’s more general failure to serve the human subjects on whose behalf it endlessly, if utterly falsely, proclaims its undying allegiance. As he put it in the late essay “Why Still Philosophy,” “After having missed its opportunity, philosophy must come to know, without any mitigation, why the world—which could be paradise here and now—can become hell itself tomorrow. Such knowledge would indeed truly be philosophy” (Adorno 1998b, 14). Stating the matter more succinctly, he noted, “It is incumbent upon philosophy . . . to provide a refuge for freedom” (10). In this respect, music and philosophy share the same responsibility, just as each needs the other in order to realize its potential for truth.20 The “language of music,” that is, must “speak” through the voice given to thought.

In his 1956 essay on “Music, Language, and Composition,” Adorno assigned profound significance to musical sounds: “They say something, often something humane” (Adorno 2002c, 114). Music is the (concrete) voice of yearning for happiness, which cannot otherwise be directly annunciacted, let alone be realized. But as the expression of hope, which seeks to name the philosophical (and spiritual) Absolute that nevertheless is unnamable, music “speaks” indirectly.21 Adorno stressed the similarities of music to language in order to outline how musical processes produce meaning—though he acknowledged that
what music “says” cannot be abstracted from the music, as occurs with language, because music is not constituted by a referential sign system. Unlike language, music has no concepts, but like language it does possess a coherent and meaningful structure. As an “organized coherence of sounds” music is analogous to speech; it “has its sentence, phrase, period, and punctuation.” Like language, music is “a temporal succession of articulated sounds.” Its content is the “wealth of all those things underlying the musical grammar and syntax. Every musical phenomenon points beyond itself, on the strength of what it recalls, from what it distinguishes itself, by what means it awakens expectation” (Adorno 2002c, 113, 115).

Music is languagelike, but it is not language. Music is riddlelike—enigmatical: it says something that the listener understands and yet doesn’t. Like all art, music cannot be “pinned down as to what it says, and yet it speaks” (Adorno 2002c, 122). Richard Wolin points out that,

Unlike philosophy, the language of art is sensuous. Art’s mode of articulation relies on images, sounds, and colors rather than the clarity of discursive argument. Consequently as vehicles of truth works of art are inherently “enigmatic” (rätselhaft). And it is precisely this enigmatic quality that beseeches, implores, and requires the philosophical interpretation of art. In other words, this dynamic alone mandates the necessity of aesthetic theory. (Wolin 1990, 39, emphasis in original)

Further to the same point, Adorno insisted that the enigmatical nature of art is bound up with history. “It was through history that [artworks] became an enigma; it is history that ever and again makes them such, and, conversely, it is history alone—which gave them their authority—that holds at a distance the embarrassing question of their raison d’être” (Adorno 1997, 120).

Adorno understood the enigmatical character of art not as its failure but as an essential component of its being art in the first place; he perceived the residue of the uncertain in art as all the more critical under prevailing historical circumstance to the extent that art’s enigmaticalness constituted a resistance to its instrumental utilization. The enigmatical character of music, for Adorno, marked its connection to utopia.

During the long period of so-named common practice, conventions
(already in place by the eighteenth century) increasingly served to make music’s meanings appear self-evident; accordingly, music’s enigmatic character was ever more concealed. Today, Adorno argued, when tradition no longer “prescribes anything for music,” music’s enigmatic character re-emerges, though it remains accessible only through attention to its historical characteristics and mediations (Adorno 2002e, 140–41). Music “speaks” through a process of mimesis, which in turn demands thought: reflexivity on music’s immanence, production, realization (performance), and consumption alike.

Mimesis—or mimetic expression—constitutes a central feature of Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Mimetic activity occurs both in production (in music, both composing and performing) and in consumption (listening). Mimesis, as Adorno envisions its ideal realization, results from the rational manipulation of musical materials (form, melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, and so on) in such a way as to engage and indeed to render problematic their conventional usage (to cite an obvious example, Mahler’s use in several symphonies of déclassé and low-caste instruments whose sounds intrude into the sanctioned timbres of the late-Romantic orchestra). By this means, and however momentarily, convention releases its claim to the transcendental. That is, through mimetic engagement convention is denaturalized, returned to history, and rendered profoundly social. Put differently, through mimesis the contingency of the conventional can be exposed: no longer to be perceived simply as the way things are, but as the way things have been made to seem.

In a notably evocative, not to mention intellectually challenging, assertion, Adorno names mimesis “an assimilation of the self to the other” (Nicholsen 1997, 147). That is, he regards mimesis as the enactment of reconciliation between subject and object. The subject comes to the object and reaches out to it, yet not as an act of domination but as one of regard, seeking the difference—the otherness—upon which it insists. Through mimesis the difference otherwise hidden in the sameness of convention is given to speak: another possibility is admitted by means of a remembering of what had been forgotten. The utopian quotient of artworks is reflected best in the dystopian actuality they hold up to the light. By insisting on history, artworks express the possibility of something different. Stated crassly, artworks’ mimetic engagement with convention
is one means by which subjects may gain the insight that it’s not part of the natural order that “shit happens” (as the bumper-sticker slogan has it), it’s that shit is caused.

Our individuality, our modernity (which Adorno and Horkheimer trace back to Homer), comes with a considerable bill attached. In Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno (with Max Horkheimer) argued that the human subject’s historical relation to nature was one of conflict that turns the subject against others and, ultimately, against the self. They argued that the fundamental forms of domination that organize modernity have their roots in the primordial efforts of human beings to survive in a nature—primordial totality—of which they are at once a part yet deeply alienated from and fearful of. And yet human subjects lament the very separation from nature upon which their subjectivity is ultimately grounded. Thus, by the principle Adorno and Horkheimer articulate, the designation of national parks, which first occurred during the heyday of the industrial revolution—its own signaling a kind of final triumph over nature—directly responded to the fractured relation of the subject to nature; the setting aside of small and as-yet-“untamed” geographies signified less a nostalgic return to nature than a material acknowledgment of the permanence of the fracture, in the same way that salvage anthropology in essence picks among the graves and ruins to remember what “advanced man” has destroyed to become advanced.

Adorno recognized a critical relation between natural beauty and art beauty; indeed, he argued that the separation of human beings from nature and the consequences of this separation were the very subject of art. By denaturalizing this separation—he insisted that the separation was rooted in history—one could gain access to the progressive potential of imagining a reconciliation of the opposing terms in the subject-object and man-nature dyads. Finding a means of so imagining was necessary not least because the subject’s separation from nature, self-imposed, produces a division within the self, caused by a rejection of the nature that defines our very own core. As he put it, “The concept of natural beauty rubs on a wound.” Art is called upon to answer for natural beauty, which we have degraded and yet nonetheless desire in its nonextant “perfect” state: art reflects on this fact. Art, Adorno says, “want(s) to keep nature’s promise. . . . What nature strives for in vain, artworks
fulfill” (Adorno 1997, 62, 65–66). Composer-philosopher David Dunn recently said something similar in an allusion to a lengthy passage in James Agee’s novel *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* describing the meanings and intelligence audible in the late-night calls of two foxes. Dunn comments: “We hear in the world talking to itself a sense of otherness that simultaneously mirrors our deepest sense of belonging”; and “Perhaps music is a conservation strategy for keeping something alive that we now need to make more conscious, a way of making sense of the world from which we might refashion our relationships to nonhuman living systems” (Dunn 2001, 95, 97).

In *Philosophy of New Music*, Adorno refers to music as “a gestural art, closely akin to crying,” calling it a gesture of “dissolving.” Music, like crying, addresses the reality of sorrow and seeks to reach beyond it—music of whatever “quality.”

Music and crying open the lips and bring delivery from restraint. The sentimentality of inferior music recalls in its caricature what superior music is truly capable of shaping at the boundary of frenzy: reconciliation. The man who surrenders to tears in music that no longer resembles him at the same time allows the stream of what he himself is not—what was dammed up back of the world of things—to flow back into him. In tears and singing, the alienated world is entered. “Tears pour, the earth has taken me back”—this is the gesture of music. Thus the earth reclaims Eurydice. The gesture of returning, not the feeling of waiting, describes the expression of all music, even in a world worthy of death. (Adorno forthcoming)

Ernst Bloch makes a complementary claim when, at the opening of his lengthy chapter “The Philosophy of Music” in *The Spirit of Utopia*, he lamented the separation of the subject from nature with a metaphor evoking self-isolation and audition: “We hear only ourselves. For we are gradually becoming blind to the outside.” Bloch titled this opening “Dream,” which is a recurrent motive in his utopian writing, serving here as the device through which to imagine a better world than the present one—with which he steadfastly refused to make his peace.

But we walk in the forest and we feel we are or could be what the forest dreams. . . . We do not have it—all that this moss, these strange flowers, roots, stems and shafts of light are or signify—because we ourselves are it, and stand too near to it, this ghostly and ever so nameless
quality of consciousness or of becoming-inward. But the note flares out of us, the heard note, not the note itself or its forms. Yet it shows us our way without alien means, shows us our historically inner path as a flame in which not the vibrating air but we ourselves begin to tremble, and throw off our coats. (Bloch 2000, 34)

The metaphors in play in these citations are anchored in an imagined unity within the natural world, a utopian reconciliation of the most fundamental, if distant, sort, upon which any imaginable form of hope must build. Complementarily, Nietzsche, writing against Wagner, citing in one breath the bond between music and philosophy, likewise evokes hope—via emancipation—all of it with the imagery of a nature of the sublime:

Has it been noticed that music liberates the spirit? gives wings to thought? that one becomes more of a philosopher the more one becomes a musician?— The gray sky of abstraction rent as if by lightning; the light strong enough for the filigree of things; the great problems near enough to grasp; the world surveyed as from a mountain. —I have just defined the pathos of philosophy.—And unexpectedly answers drop into my lap, a little hail of ice and wisdom, of solved problems.—Where am I?—\.\.\.. Whatever is good makes me fertile. I have no other gratitude, nor do I have any other proof for what is good. (Nietzsche 1967, 158)

Adorno offers a succinct corollary of emancipation that lies at the heart of reconciliation with otherness: “Music says We directly, regardless of its intentions” (Adorno 1997, 167).

THUS FAR

I have drawn heavily on Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory, a book which has relatively little to say about mass culture beyond its paradigmatic emergence from, and life within, the culture industry. Aesthetic Theory is foremost a text in which Adorno pursues what he understood to be the nature of the truth content of artworks, a truth rarely to be found anywhere, and not even in what, for better or worse, is commonly called “serious” art. Though Adorno evoked the extreme
anti-aesthetic specter of kitsch only a few times in this complex and lengthy volume, he allowed that the shadow of utopian semblance is preserved even in “debased” art, though to be sure he did not make this argument as openly as did Bloch. I seek to push precisely this point, and for one strategic reason, which I can best explain by beginning with what will seem a digression.

Adorno long lamented the division of all art, but music especially, into the categories of high (classical, serious) and low (popular, mass culture); at the same time he recognized the specific social reality driving the separation. He recognized that the categories themselves mirrored social divisions—and helped keep the divisions in place. To cite a mundane example, the category arrangement of CDs in stores at once reflects and helps to perpetuate these now-naturalized—indeed rampantly overdetermined—divisions, as part and parcel of cultural marketing. Think twice before going near the classical because it’s not the popular, and vice versa. Either way, the divisions help one past the uncertainty of the unknown, of stepping beyond the bounds of comfort, assurance, and predictability. In short, the labels help keep listeners in line. To argue that labeling is simply a matter of convenience is merely to reflect the dross that market culture only gives us what we already want. Musicians, as well as their listeners, learn early to present themselves within the terms of the division. To do otherwise runs enormous risks associated with not fitting in, and this translates all too easily into not having work and not being taken seriously. Only occasionally do we have the opportunity to denaturalize what for a long time has appeared as “just the way things are”—for example, the momentary dilemma regarding where in the store to look for CDs by an artist like Laurie Anderson, though the very denomination “crossover” carries the tinge of transgression (which can sometimes be marketable); too often it can work to define a location in nowhere.

To be somewhat perverse, in order to get to my main point, let’s name Mahler a crossover artist. Adorno wrote extensively, but particularly in his Mahler monograph (Adorno 1992d), about the utopian semblance that emerges when the musical high and low meet in aesthetic reconciliation in Mahler’s symphonies. However, Adorno’s point is not that the former swallows (and therefore “betters”) the latter, or that Mahler, in some Rodney King–like manner, brings the
high and low together in such fashion that they “just get along.” His point is that with Mahler a mutual transformation occurs, without either the high or the low disappearing. The sign of truth, however dim, however partial, lies in each, in essence as the raw material for a higher truth content; the one illuminates the truth of the other. I take from this that the debased (the low)—if you prefer, the already ruined—longs for the “something that’s missing” (Bloch and Adorno 1988) no less, however less successfully, than does its “better” (the high). My concern, accordingly, is to argue for the hope that lies in all music, and not simply in the music where we might more easily assume it to reside (Great Works). Perhaps we might say that the often-irritating inescapability of music today is more than the result of marketing schemes in overdrive and as much the simultaneous reflection of the increasingly desperate longing for whatever musical sonority points toward: a promesse de bonheur. A promise defines the unrealized, to be sure; it results from an acknowledgment of unmet need. Stendahl, from whom Adorno borrowed the phrase “promesse de bonheur,” articulated this point. Music, he said, “as an art, suffuses the soul of man with sweet regret, by giving it a glimpse of happiness; and a glimpse of happiness, even if it is no more than a dream of happiness, is almost the dawning of hope” (Stendahl 1972, 347, emphasis in original).}

**LISTENING**

In the remarks that follow, I want to pursue in some detail the social stakes of listening that emerge within the assumed context of two paradigms of late-modern society: (1) the suspicion and surveillance that increasingly surrounds all cultural activity, and (2) the mechanisms of industrialization through which so much, though hardly all, music is realized. I wish to make three particular points. The first is that listening is a cultural, rather than natural, practice, and one of enormous social import. The second point, closely related to the first, is that listening has to be learned. The third, emerging from the first two, is that the hope immanent to music is manifest in sounds that are not merely heard but are listened to; I’m suggesting, that is, that the semblance of utopia in music becomes the more
apparent when a reciprocal relationship exists between the object (music) and the listening subject. However, my point is not simply a reflection of the mundane instrumental reality that an active listener may have a better sense of what the music is “saying”; rather, it’s that active listening itself enacts a form of subject-object reciprocity (or, if you wish, reconciliation) that lies at the heart of any imaginable form of social utopia. Active listening honors music; active listening acknowledges the otherness just as it seeks otherness and even merges with it.

Jacques Attali, Roland Barthes, Ernst Bloch, and Adorno have addressed the question of listening in ways pertinent to this essay, and I’ll deal with each of them, though only with Adorno in detail. My purpose is to suggest that listening, by which I mean focused audition, is a path to knowledge, one that has the potential to complement Adorno’s perception of the musical avant-garde’s socially critical utopianism: “New music keeps reopening the wound, instead of affirming the world as it exists. . . . Above all, then, the goal of new music must be the complete liberation of the human subject” (1999b, 120–21).

In Noise: The Political Economy of Music (first published in 1977), the French economist Jacques Attali argued that “the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible” (Attali 1985, 3). Music for Attali is a special kind of noise (noise in his formulation being the aggregate of all sound) that engages or confronts all other forms of sound/noise, whether naturally occurring or culturally produced, though it’s the latter that principally interests him. His concern is not to theorize music in society but, contrarily, to theorize society through music. Listening receives primary attention. Attali hears in music the sounds of the past that shape the sounds, and, more to the point, the society, of the future. Accordingly, his focus is on late modernity and its historical roots, with respect to which one insight in particular, organizes his thinking: Music “makes audible what is essential in the contradictions of the developed societies: an anxiety-ridden quest for lost difference, following a logic from which difference is banished” (5, emphasis in original). In other words, he posits music’s exposure of the social anxiety engendered by the radical separation of subject from object. Echoing Adorno’s own utopian regard for art generally, Attali suggested
that music is a “refuge for residual irrationality,” which he set in opposition to the instrumentalized rationality organizing modernity, while nonetheless recognizing that music is at the same time commonly employed—as it were, against itself—as a force for shaping the increasingly administered late-modern dystopia; music’s uses and its effects, not least the progressive ones, are anything but guaranteed (of which more later).

Listening necessarily means hearing much more around us than we might wish to hear, for the organ of hearing, unlike the eyes (which can easily look away), cannot so easily or conveniently be closed to sound. The fact that in late modernity sound, notably musical sound, is now fundamentally inescapable, articulates for Attali the stakes of his larger concern: “Listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political” (6). Since noise (including the “noise” of music) is the source of power, “power has always listened to it with fascination. . . . [and] What is called music today is all too often only a disguise for the monologue of power (7–9)." Accordingly, Attali’s argument hinges on the question not simply of listening but on listening for. And this brings me to Barthes.

Barthes points out that listening, at its most basic, defends against the unexpected; again, we listen for. His formulation invites reaction: listening “either reveals danger or promises the satisfaction of need” (Barthes 1985a, 247). But Barthes’s interest is in something less obvious and more profound. He quickly turns to rhythm—in language, speech, music—through which, he suggests, is revealed not the possible (danger, satisfaction) but the secret. By secret he means something real but that can penetrate our consciousness only in code, “which serves simultaneously to encipher and to decipher that reality.” Listening, in other words, involves hermeneutics: “to listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the ‘underside’ of meaning (what is experienced, postulated, intentionalized as hidden)” (249). And though at this juncture Barthes associates the hermeneutics with religion (“To listen is the evangelical verb par excellence”), his point is larger and echoes Attali’s: we listen in order to decipher the future; and we listen for transgression. But it’s not Barthes’s echo of Attali’s
evocation of listening for danger, transgression, and subversion that most interests me. Instead, it’s his account of the utopian potential that arises from what could be called the intersubjectivity of listening that lends something more important to this discussion.

Barthes distinguishes between hearing, which he notes is a physiological phenomenon, and listening, which he describes as an intersubjective psychological act, which thus presumes reciprocity: “I am listening’ also means ‘listen to me’” (246). In short, listening invokes the other: “The injunction to listen is the total interpellation of one subject by another: . . . it creates transference: ‘listen to me’ means touch me, know that I exist” (250–51, emphasis in original). In order to radicalize the insight, Barthes organizes his comments around the specific form of listening associated with the telephone, a medium that radically diminishes the agency of every sense except that of hearing (no longer always the case, to be sure, given the newest technologies that permit the transmission of both voice and image).34 His point is that the telephone concentrates the entire somatic self in the voice of the speaker and the ear of the auditor. Under conditions where the auditor is successfully interpellated by the speaker, a second, as it were, silent interpellation occurs. The auditor, through the silence of listening, intersubjectively answers back: “listening [thus] speaks” (252, emphasis in original).

Barthes’s concern with the intersubjectivity of listening is fundamentally utopian, to the extent that the listening he invokes by means of a telephone conversation is, in essence, voluntary, even wished, hence not coerced. Under such circumstances, listening connects; it is, perforce, (re)conciliatory. The intersubjectivity he describes can occur as well, and at least as deeply (spiritually), with music, whether performed live or heard recorded. Barthes is keenly aware of this. His essay turns to music in order to invoke the singing voice, noting what he here and elsewhere famously termed the “grain of the voice” (Barthes 1977; and Barthes 1985a):

The singing voice, that very specific space in which a tongue encounters a voice and permits those who know how to listen to it to hear what we can call its “grain”—the singing voice is not the breath but indeed that materiality of the body emerging from the throat, a site where the phonic metal hardens and takes shape. (Barthes 1985a, 255, emphasis added)
In the singing voice Barthes hears reconciliation of the subject-object binary antagonism. Music emerges from the body’s muscles and spatial interiority in the utterly disembodied ethereality of its sounds; so doing, music bridges, even perhaps momentarily erases, the distinction between soma and spirit. And more, embodying the “corporality of speech, the voice is located at the articulation of body and discourse” (255). Barthes thus doubly articulates the connection between the seeming immateriality of the singing voice and the body’s flesh—the metaphysical and the physical—both of which belong to history (discourse).

Barthes nonetheless recognizes that the utopian quotient he attaches to the intersubjectivity of listening must be qualified by the changed circumstances of modern listening. Nowadays, he suggests, listening functions under conditions of panic. “It is believed that, in order to liberate listening, it suffices to begin speaking oneself” (259). Think of Crossfire and similar television “news and opinion” shows, where the evening’s guests commonly shout over one another, less to listen and more to silence their opponents. By contrast, Barthes suggests, “a free listening is essentially a listening which circulates, which permutates, which disaggregates, by its mobility, the fixed network of the roles of speech: it is not possible to imagine a free society, if we agree in advance to preserve within it the old modes of listening: those of the believer, the disciple, and the patient” (259).

The sounds of late modernity, including all too much music, commonly interpellate us less as subjects than as the subjected, and the subjection that’s proffered is not uncommonly sadomasochistic. To cite a hyperbolic example, the better to make the point (though I would argue nonetheless for the example’s socially paradigmatic qualities), take futurist Luigi Russolo who, with anticipated delight, charted among his “6 families of noises” to be realized mechanically in his would-be futurist orchestra, the “Voices of animals and people,” which incorporate solely the sounds of distress and suffering: “Shouts, Screams, Shrieks, Wails, Hoots, Howls, Death rattles, Sobs” (Russolo 1986, 28). Yet even in Russolo’s neofascist rant there lies a not-quite-silent oppositional and utopian prospect to the extent that the sounds he evokes are not only properly associated with suffering and abjection; they are also at heart pleas for life, against all odds. Bloch sensed as much. In The Principle of Hope, he commented that
“music surpasses other arts in its ability to absorb the manifold griefs, wishes and rays of hope common to the socially oppressed. . . . It is inherent in the material of hope, even when the music is expressing sorrow at its times, society or world, and even in death” (Bloch 1985, 201). Russolo, as if in spite of himself, has adopted Bloch’s insight avant la lettre and cut directly to the chase.

Barthes concludes his essay on listening by noting that no law can oblige us to take pleasure where we don’t want to, “no law is in a position to constrain our listening; freedom of listening is as necessary as freedom of speech. That is why this apparently modest notion . . . is finally like a little theater on whose stage those two modern deities, one bad and one good, confront each other: power and desire” (Barthes 1985a, 260). And this leads me, finally, back to Adorno.

DIALECTICS OF STRUCTURAL LISTENING

Adorno’s commentaries on the social state of listening are several and oft-cited, among which none has received as much attention, commonly hostile, as his insistence on the importance of what he duly termed “structural listening.” I want first to rehearse briefly what he meant by the phrase, then précis the case against structural listening made by the most thoughtful of its numerous critics, Rose Rosengard Subotnik, and finally, and in some detail, suggest what of Adorno’s concept bears relevance within the larger context of this essay. First, what does Adorno mean by “structural listening”?

In one simple sentence in his 1941 essay “The Radio Symphony” Adorno encapsulated both the meaning and the stakes of what he intended by the phrase. Addressing what he regarded as the locus classicus of musical idealism, he argued that, “structurally, one hears the first bar of a Beethoven symphonic movement only at the very moment when one hears the last bar” (Adorno 2002h, 255). As Subotnik effectively parses Adorno, “This concept of structural listening . . . was intended to describe a process wherein the listener follows and comprehends the unfolding realization, with all of its detailed inner relationships, of a generating musical conception, or what Schoenberg calls an ‘idea’” (Subotnik 1996, 150). Expressed
negatively, and in light of what Adorno feared was the more common form of modern listening, music is not “about” any of its individual moments made to stand alone, and that particularly included those moments of apparent distinctive beauty or climactic drama—what Adorno witheringly referred to (writing in English) as music’s “gustatory qualities” (Adorno 1945, 211), got at by what he termed “atomized listening” (Adorno 2002h, 261–62). Hearing music as little more than a series of disconnected episodes, he argued, produces a music that sounds like its own quotation: “Details are [thus] deified as well as reified” (Adorno 2002h, 266).

The centrality of the whole notwithstanding, Adorno fully recognized, and clearly valorized, the musical moment, the particular—even what he called, for example, beautiful passages (schöne Stellen). More to the point, Adorno promoted the realization through listening of a reciprocal relation between part and whole, by means of which each would be the more fully realized. Heard atomistically, by contrast, the detail was rendered meaningless in its isolation, just as any sense of the whole was obliterated. Conversely, however, if the detail were heard solely as a building block of something larger, it would surrender any sense of its own spontaneity—which ultimately must be preserved if the whole is to express anything more than its own immanent structure. The relation between part and whole is radically reciprocal; each emerges and, indeed, lives from and through its other.

In musical details Adorno heard the subject speaking, willingly bending toward the musical object (the whole) in order to make possible the work, a whole larger than the sum of its individual parts. Something, in other words, like a utopian society. Musical details, bending and blending their expressive character toward the whole, while retaining their own specific character, permitted the reenactment of reconciliation between subject and object, for Adorno the artwork’s highest goal. He understood the stakes to be high. “Form,” as he put it, “is the law of the transfiguration of the existing, counter to which it represents freedom” (Adorno 1997, 143). Form takes what is and refashions it into the semblance of what might be.

Engaging Adorno’s concept of structural listening, Rose Rosengard Subotnik historicized the concept, locating it in bourgeois formalist (if not precisely positivistic) aesthetics—think Hanslick’s On
the Musically Beautiful at the historical beginnings, Stravinsky’s Poetics of Music at the end. She aptly pointed out that very little music can actually lay claim to the (utopian) autonomy principle assumed by Adorno and critical to the demand for structural listening. This principle, Subotnik pointed out, cannot be applied to Western musical structures prior to the nineteenth century, to say nothing of the music produced elsewhere in the world. She further correctly noted that structural listening is fundamentally applicable only to instrumental music, not vocal. Moreover, Adorno—as well as Schoenberg (Schoenberg 1975), of course—stressed the point that structural listening is directed toward the discernment of development in musical structures, notwithstanding the fact that development is a foundation principle, as Subotnik states, of “very little music” (Subotnik 1996, 159).

It’s not the case that Adorno rejected all forms of listening other than structural; after all, not all forms of music demanded it, and neither did all occasions for listening. Music, for example, often served its purpose well “just” as entertainment, as, for example, music in the background (essentially passive listening), to recall an earlier trope. But entertainment, as he realized, could easily stand on its own, often without controversy attached to it, as something society wanted; it didn’t need either him or philosophy to make its point or define its social worth. Its worth, which he regarded as genuine, was compensatory; it offered relief, however momentarily. But relief as such was insufficient to the social responsibilities music, like other art forms, needed to shoulder, were music to contribute to any future limitation on human suffering. Beyond relief, there was engagement. In turn, engagement for Adorno elicited the demand for a kind of music that, through its own internal processes, was capable of addressing the myriad complexities of modern life. “Tea for Two,” whatever its genuine entertainment worth, was not assigned that task; Mahler’s Third Symphony or Schoenberg’s Erwartung were—and were up to the job: “Works become beautiful,” Adorno noted, “by the force of their opposition to what simply exists” (Adorno 1997, 51).

One doesn’t require structural listening, or for that matter Schenkerian analysis, to understand what’s going on musically in “Tea for Two” or “Hail to the Chief”—just as one doesn’t need to get soaked to figure out when it’s raining. With Mahler and Schoenberg what might be gained from structural listening, by contrast, is
amply demonstrated by Adorno’s own studies of these composers. Nonetheless, as Subotnik appropriately insists, there is rather more to music, any music, than structure. Accordingly, it’s crucial not to fetishize structural listening and thereby, however unwillingly, silence those parameters of sonic experience that cannot be understood simply as structure and as such are not subject to conventional musical-theoretical analysis. Indeed, Adorno was at once sensitive to this fact and at pains to acknowledge the point in his own musical-analytical writing (which depended foremost on his ears, rather than his eyes focused on a printed score), as evident, for example, in his Mahler monograph (Adorno 1992d), principally a study of the symphonies—which have elsewhere and often by others been subjected to the most intense (and sometimes stultifying) hard-core formal analysis—precisely what Adorno does not do.40

Adorno’s concern for the social efficacy of structural listening depends less on the fact that it so aptly seems to “fit” the compositional processes of complex works, and more on the cultural duress under which such music (along with other musics) maintains its life. That is, the difficulty of difficult music is itself a reflection on the lamentable state of society and the subjects who inhabit it. Take that as a given. What matters is how that socially necessary difficulty can be made to speak. Adorno’s point is that it cannot speak on its own. If it is to be more than sound and fury signifying nothing, the listener must make the conscious decision to do what’s necessary to meet the music halfway, so to speak, in particular by coming to terms with the music’s immanence, by means of which it “speaks.” What happens thereafter has no guarantees—the listener’s active stance engages the composition, not simply “receives” it under the terms Adorno describes; yet without such reciprocity between music and its auditor (or its performer, to be sure), the music is ironically “silenced.” Put differently, and to borrow a phrase from Queens of the Stone Age, without this reciprocal “exchange,” what remains is little more than “songs for the deaf.”41

For Adorno, hard times demand hard music—and hard listening. Hard listening, however, is not its own end but a means by which to conjoin musical sound and philosophy.42 The musical thinking congealed, like history, within music is released in the acts of interpretation that emerge from performance and reception, both of
which are anchored in the act of focused listening. As he put it in *Aesthetic Theory*, “History is the content of artworks. To analyze artworks means no less than to become conscious of the history immanently sedimented in them” (Adorno 1997, 85). For Adorno, the ultimate “beauty” of music is its truth content; music’s truth is in its sounds, which must be both heard and thought. One might be tempted to accuse Adorno of devalorizing musical sound in favor of thinking about music, as though the sounds of music were nothing more than a vehicle for philosophy. The accusation would be false. One might far more appropriately, and simply, “accuse” him of regarding music with as much seriousness and social significance as it deserved and of being willing to do whatever was necessary to elicit the music’s aesthetic-social truth.

Finally, whatever the limitations of applicability as regards the sorts of music for which structural listening is most appropriate, Adorno’s conception posits something eminently applicable to listening generally: Structural listening posits an active listener. That is, Adorno perceived active listening roughly analogous to what Barthes, speaking of performers, called musical doing (Barthes 1985b). What’s central to Adorno is the intersubjective relation that active listening establishes between the subject (the listener) and the object (the composition), which object, at a minimum, sediments within itself history, which by definition is always already (dialectically) intersubjective. The humane quality of music emerges not simply from the fact that music is made by and for human beings; rather, music’s humaneness develops from the specific fact that music mediates human longing into an acoustics at once part of the social and cultural boundaries marked by history and language and at the same time reaches well beyond what language can pin down, gain control over, classify, regulate, and, not least, help market, all of this the result of a history that recognizes language first and foremost for its instrumental potential.43

It is precisely through the act listening to and listening for that music’s utopian character, as Adorno understood it, could be made to appear. At first glance Adorno’s position on structural listening may seem both unreasonable (who but trained musicians can hear music in the manner he prescribes?) and/or elitist (the likely high socioeconomic tier necessary to support the requisite musical training,
not to mention the leisure time for listening). But the matter is not so simple. Adorno himself was keenly sensitive to the history of privilege that accrued to the history of art, but that fact by itself could not for him stand as good reason to disparage art—or to deny art’s truth content. Put differently, if art’s own (internal) resistance to the regressive nature of its origins was to be realized, the act of reception must meet the artwork’s immanent demands for this to occur. The fact that the demand was likely not often actually met served as an indictment of the very social causes preventing its occurrence.

Adorno’s well-known, and to some infamous, typology of listening characterizes eight types of auditor, the expert at one end of the spectrum, and the “anti-musical” at the other (Adorno 1988, 4). None is perfect. Every station on the scale is rife with shortcomings: all forms of listening bear the marks of an antagonistic social totality. Type three, for example, the “culture consumer,” Adorno associates with the “upper and uplifted” bourgeois symphony and opera crowd whose social prestige is reflected in and perpetuated by showing up—these are people who, as he puts it, “posture as elitists hostile to the mass”; they are the same group that “to a great extent determines the official life of music” (6–7). The point I’m after is that Adorno reads off this typology the social divisions of late-stage capitalism, which is to say that the critique informing the typology is not organized by elitism but by its extreme opposite: solidarity with the masses. Adorno, here as elsewhere, identifies not with society’s victors but with its victims. “My point,” Adorno concludes,
subjects whose ears are socially scarred. And yet, of course, listeners abound: however imperfectly they may hear, they recognize the nearly absolute necessity that the world’s noise includes music, not simply as an accompaniment, but as an alternative.

CAVEAT

The true “magic” of music lies in the degree to which it mirrors in its material objectivity the spirit and spirituality that enlivens it (Adorno 1997, 86–94). Music makes audible the materiality of human spirituality and the spirituality of our materiality, not as forever separate and oppositional entities but as momentarily reconciled, a microcosm of society in a state of bliss.

And yet, as ever, the dialectical nature of spirituality itself must be factored. In 1937 Herbert Marcuse referenced the phrase “affirmative culture” to designate the role, pervasively assigned to cultural practices in late modernity, of cheering (by aestheticizing) for the status quo. By this means, culture (in the utopian sense of what might be, as opposed to what is) is neutralized. Affirmative culture, he suggested, insisted on the soul’s nobility, but precisely because it cost very little to do so—and with the added advantage that appeals to the soul’s nobility could serve as a safety valve to release social pressures demanding change. Locating humanity in the soul, in other words, all too conveniently leaves intact the material reality that debases the body. According to the operating principles of affirmative culture, “Humanity becomes an inner state. Freedom, goodness, and beauty become spiritual qualities. . . . [Affirmative] Culture speaks of the dignity of ‘man’ without concerning itself with a concretely more dignified status for men” (Marcuse 1968, 103).

Society’s invitation to music merely to affirm—to play the role of “tolerated negativity” or, worse, as a “lubricant for the system” as it exists—is writ large and accompanied by myriad enforcement techniques (Adorno 1991a, 102; Adorno 1997, 311). Playing its assigned role in the domain of domination, music puts on the costume of reconciliation and consolation. Its name tag reads “cultural decoration,” and it moves about the floor to the tunes of the easiest of listening.

Yet even under these circumstances, the contradictions immanent to
the truth of its lie—“The whole is the false” (Adorno 1978, 50)—can all too plainly render the default “easiness” of listening into productively painful realizations about what stands behind the mask of the most culinary of sonorities. And this is so because, even in debased form, music’s own otherness from mundane existence remains a pervasive reminder of something better that neither it nor we can properly name but that we can nonetheless imagine. Bloch argued that “music’s connection with this world means that it is nothing less than a seismograph of society. For it reflects any cracks beneath the social surface, expresses desires for change, and is synonymous with hoping” (Bloch 1985, 243, original emphasis).

Hope aims for utopia. What Bloch named the “utopian function” has agency; it “knows about explosive powers since the utopian function itself is a condensed form of them: the utopian function is the unimpaired reason of a militant optimism” (Bloch 1988c, 107). And yet it is precisely the “better” to which music points that is used against what music otherwise aims toward. The neutralization of music’s insistence on the truth regarding untruth is what the culture industry so pervasively works to mask under the guise of its entertainments. “Today,” Adorno noted in 1945, “the terms ethereal and sublime have become trademarks” (Adorno 1945, 211). The affirmative element of music, as Adorno reminded himself in the notes to his never-completed Beethoven monograph, lies “merely in the fact that it is a voice lifted up, that it is music at all.” Accordingly, music can proclaim against its own and society’s greater interests, that “all is well” (1998a, 6–7)—or, as I’m arguing, and despite all the claims to the contrary, that all is not well. Either way, no guarantees.

In 1990, during the academy’s first-blush romance with postmodernism, Fredric Jameson mused about the continued relevance of Adorno’s unrelenting dialectical critique of modernity. Recalling Adorno’s famous lament that to write poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric, Jameson aptly, if bitterly, posed a question informed by the suburban imagery of the postmodern condition: he asked whether nowadays one could bear to read Dialectic of Enlightenment “next to the pool” (Jameson 1990, 248). Those who turn away from Adorno on account of the often-alleged unrelenting pessimism of the “news” he imparted would do themselves a considerable favor were they
to connect his critique, unrelenting as it may be, to the sustained hope that informs it at heart.

Bloch, Adorno’s older contemporary, with whom he shared a complicated friendship, gave music a pride of place in his extensive utopian writings, the gist of which is anchored in the power of music to point to something beyond itself, something better. Bloch offers a reason why music playing next to the pool, like reading Adorno there, might offer rather more than a distraction from the boredom of lying motionless in the sun:

Thus music as a whole stands at the farther limits of humanity, but at those limits where humanity, with new language and haloed by the call to achieved intensity, to the attained world of ‘we,’ is first taking shape. And this ordering in our musical expression means a house, indeed a crystal, but one derived from our future freedom; a star, but one that will be a new Earth. (Bloch 1985, 243, emphasis in original)

That mundane living is lacking life is an ordinary, indeed clichéd, experience. Music, at its best, engages precisely this lacuna, though not in such a way as to alleviate the lack but to make its reality at once undeniable and potentially productive of something better. Music is the stuff of insight, just as insight is the prerequisite for any substantive engagement with history and historicity. Music, at its best, does not decorate social antagonisms but highlights them; it helps to render the visibility of suffering insistent. The pleasures of music are to be had, Adorno argued, not in an untroubled prettiness that under better circumstances we might be better able to both sustain and to afford with a clean conscience; instead, the true pleasures of music are properly located in the means—whether “pretty” or ugly—by which music never lets us forget that the most beautiful artifact of human activity is the promulgation of universal justice.

Adorno’s concluding aphorism in Minima Moralia opens with a remark, more than slightly similar to the one by Bloch just cited addressing philosophy, that he would unquestionably apply to music as well: “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption”
Adorno’s insistent invocation of hope, found here and elsewhere throughout his writing, hinges on the ordinary insight that the world as it is didn’t just happen; it was made to happen. Our future isn’t written in the stars but is to be written on earth. It’s ultimately up to “us”:

The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death. Yet they do not come from the sky. They are controlled from earth. It depends upon human beings themselves whether they will extinguish these lights and awake from a nightmare which only threatens to become actual as long as men believe in it. (1991b, 83)

In short, listen up.

Notes

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1. Despite Adorno’s comments in “Music in the Background” about the silencing of music, he elsewhere (in 1953) acknowledged precisely the point made later by Attali: “While the ever-present and inescapable music installs itself as a piece of concrete daily life, as one producer-standardized consumer good among others, and divests itself of everything that might go beyond service to and betrayal of the consumer, it becomes comical” (2002e, 135–36); and also: “Music is no longer exceptional . . . rather, it has achieved an ubiquity that makes it part of everyday life” (1988, 129).

2. Compare Adorno 1997, 253: “If a work of authentic music strays into the social sphere of background music [as in a café], it may unexpectedly transcend that sphere by the purity that is stained by social function.”


4. See Leppert 1988 for a variety of neoplatonist rants appearing in European courtesy and conduct literature.

5. To which Bloch added, concerning utopia, “But it is not something like nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is not yet in the sense of a possibility; that it could be there if we could only do something for it” (Bloch and Adorno 1988, 3). Utopia, as he points out (4) is dependent on social conditions, just as “the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present” (12).

6. This is the closing line of Adorno’s monograph In Search of Wagner.

7. Adorno 1998a, 10: “Music can express only what is proper to itself: this
means that words and concepts cannot express music’s content *directly*, but only in mediated form, that is, as philosophy”

8. Adorno 1997, 32: “The new is the longing for the new, not the new itself: That is what everything new suffers from. What takes itself to be utopia remains the negation of what exists and is obedient to it.”

9. Adorno 1992a, 92: “No moral terrorism can control the fact that the face the work of art turns toward the viewer gives him pleasure, even if it is only the formal fact of temporary liberation from the compulsion of practical ends.” Compare St. John Chrysostom (d. 407): “Nothing so uplifts the mind, giving it wings and freeing it from the earth, releasing it from the prison of the body, affecting it with love of wisdom, and causing it to scorn all things pertaining to this life, as modulated melody and the divine chant composed of number” (Chrysostom 1998, 123).

10. Painter Francis Bacon: “Of course what in a curious way one is always hoping to do is to paint the one picture which will annihilate all the other ones, to concentrate everything into one painting. . . . I’ve got an obsession with doing the one perfect image” (Hullot-Kentor 2004, 183). Compare Adorno 1997, 35: “The truth content of artworks is fused with their critical content. That is why works are also critics of one another. This, not the historical continuity of their dependencies, binds artworks to one another; ‘each artwork is the mortal enemy of the other’; the unity of the history of art is the dialectical figure of determinate negation. Only in this way does art serve its idea of reconciliation” [the internal quote references a remark Adorno previously had made elsewhere].

11. The currently erupting legal and ethical controversies surrounding file sharing have brought the issue of possession a degree of renewed public awareness that far surpasses those of a generation ago over cassette-tape copying. The point I’m after, however, is entirely separate from concerns over the physical ownership of recordings (of whatever legality).

12. Adorno incorporated the critical proviso that “kitsch only forfeits its right to exist when it enters into a parasitical relationship to history, mimics its verdicts and finds itself forbidden to reverse them” (1992b, 43).

13. Great art, by contrast, Adorno suggests, stares history directly in the face and speaks the unspeakable—and sometimes the unbearable. And great art knows how to evoke kitsch for the utopia that inhabits its shadows—Mahler generally; Berg occasionally: “The greatest works of art do not exclude the lower depths, but kindle the flame of utopia on the smoking ruins of the past” (1999a, 79).

14. Elsaesser 1981–82, 115: “Kitsch is the gesture that embraces what once was product of a living tradition, covering the gap between past and present which only historical understanding could otherwise rescue with a desperately fake aura. Kitsch and myth are both historical attempts to live outside history.” Berthold Hoeckner (in a personal communication) notes that both art and kitsch “share the fundamental experience of alternative realms of existence and hence
are pointers to a better world. . . . *Kitsch* does it through affirmation; *Kunst* through negation. Put differently, *Kitsch* evokes a lost past; *Kunst* projects a utopian future. Where *Kitsch* is concerned with the ‘no longer,’ *Kunst* is concerned with the ‘not yet.’ . . . *Kitsch* and *Kunst* exist (necessarily or mostly) in impure mixtures. One might say that the *Kitsch* portion of *Kunst* is its regressive component, while the *Kunst* portion of *Kitsch* is its progressive element. The extremes touch, paradoxically, where *Kitsch* is most authentic. Precisely where *Kitsch* is silent (or silenced) music, we hear its *Kunst*-voice.”

15. Zipes (Bloch 1988d, xxxvii) points out that, by the nineteenth century, the colporteur’s “materials catered to the dreams and wishes of lower-class readers who looked for something totally outside their ordinary routines. Though the works were of dubious ideological character—often sexist, militaristic, and sadistic—Bloch refused to dismiss them as reactionary because they addressed the hunger of the imagination of people whose wants he felt must be respected.” Zipes adds, in this regard, that “the drive for the new [represented, for example, by the constant flood of pulp fiction] is obviously conditioned by fashion and market demands, but it also represents a constant hope for something more than the market can offer, something that exceeds society’s limits.” Speaking more generally about art, Zipes, echoing Bloch, later adds (xl), “To write, to compose, to paint. To read, to listen, to view. These are human acts of hope.”

16. Bloch continues: “The dream of colportage is: never again to be trapped by the routine of daily life. And at the end there is: happiness, love, victory. The splendor toward which the adventure story heads is not won through a rich marriage and the like as in the magazine story but rather through an active journey to the Orient of the dream” (1988b, 183).

17. Adorno (1981a, 27–28) makes this point with regard to affirmative culture generally: “Just because culture affirms the validity of the principle of harmony within an antagonistic society, albeit in order to glorify that society, it cannot avoid confronting society with its own notion of harmony and thereby stumbling on discord. The ideology which affirms life is forced into opposition to life by the immanent drive of the ideal.”

18. See similar remarks in Adorno 2002c, 114.

19. Compare Adorno 1991b, 74, concerning the separation of fact from value, and the positivism of “information”: “As facts they are arranged in such a way that they can be grasped as quickly and easily as possible. Wrenched from all context, detached from thought, they are made instantly accessible to an infantile grasp.”

20. Adorno 1988, 149: “Criticism is immanent to music itself; it is the procedure which objectively brings each successful composition as a force field to its resultant. Music criticism is required by music’s own formal law: the historic development [*Entfaltung*] of works and of their truth content occurs in the critical medium” (translation modified).


24. Nicholsen 1997 cites a number of passages in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* where the term is used in various contexts.

25. Adorno 1997, 53: “In art the subject exposes itself, at various levels of autonomy, to its other, separated from it and yet not altogether separated. . . . That art, something mimetic, is possible in the midst of rationality, and that it employs its means, is a response to the faulty irrationality of the rational world as an over-administered world.” Georges Bataille addressed this matter in his account of eroticism: “Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea” (Bataille 1992, 22). He regarded eroticism as what he called “the disequilibrium in which the being consciously calls his own existence in question. In one sense, the being loses himself deliberately, but then the subject is identified with the object losing his identity” (31).

26. Composer, performer, and listener each in turn make themselves aware of the music’s mimetic comportment through the act of interpretation, which requires what Adorno perceives as philosophical engagement. Adorno 1992f, 3: “To interpret music means: to make music. Musical interpretation is performance, which, as synthesis, retains the similarity to language, while obliterating every specific resemblance. This is why the idea of interpretation is not an accidental attribute of music, but an integral part of it.” Compare Adorno 1997, 128: “The need of artworks for interpretation, their need for the production of their truth content, is the stigma of their constitutive insufficiency.” Although Adorno consistently speaks of a score in these discussions, the principle he invokes applies as well to nonnotated music and improvised music and is in no sense necessarily confined to high-caste artworks.

27. Adorno 1997, 62: “Wholly artificial, the artwork seems to be the opposite of what is not made, nature. As pure antitheses, however, each refers to the other: nature to the experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy. Therefore reflection on natural beauty is irrevocably requisite to the theory of art.”

28. Compare Adorno 1997, 71: “Under its optic, art is not the imitation of nature but the imitation of natural beauty”; natural beauty, he insists, is “the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity” (73). See further Paetzold 1997.

29. The internal quotation is from Goethe, *Faust* I, line 784.

30. This translation is based on the second edition, published as *Geist der Utopie: Bearbeitete Neuaufgabe der zweiten Fassung von 1923* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1964). Written in 1915–16, that is, during conflagration and general trauma of World War I, the book was first published in 1918.

31. Adorno 2002e traces this same connection.

32. My thanks to Paul Chaikin for bringing this passage to my attention.

33. Attali 1985, 7: “Eavesdropping, censorship, recording, and surveillance are weapons of power. The technology of listening in on, ordering, transmitting, and recording noise is at the heart of this apparatus.”

34. Rose Rosengard Subotnik, in a personal communication, points out that
cell phones “massively reinforce the image of phones as a medium for hearing only. Think even of the way they look: the mouthpiece doesn’t extend anywhere near as low as the mouth. Thus, the only anchor for such phones is literally the ear, which still fits into the earpiece.”

35. Compare Bloch 1985, 237: “If death conceived as an annihilating scythe is the hardest non-utopia, then music is pitted against it as the most utopian of all the arts. It contests it with a concern that is all the greater because precisely death’s mysterious territory is filled with night, a generative force which seems so profoundly familiar to music within this world.” This volume is based on a 1974 anthology of Bloch’s musical writings. For an alternate translation, see Bloch 1986, 3:1063, 1097. Das Prinzip Hoffnung was written in the United States between 1938 and 1947 and was revised in 1953 and again in 1959. The book was first published in 1959.

36. See 1988, 2002a, 2002d, 2002f, 2002i. His principle argument is that listeners are socially made not born, that listening is a cultural practice, and that modernity has served the practice poorly, by turning music—all music, to every degree possible—into a thing, a market object. Listeners—and he means all listeners, whatever their social class or educational background—are in his words “betrayed,” and the betrayal’s cost is charged against their own subjectivity and identity.

37. In the subsequent discussion, Adorno amplifies his point in a discussion of the Fifth Symphony regarding the ways in which its musical processes are rendered inaudible through the limitations of 1941 AM radio.

38. Adorno 1984; see also Adorno 2002a, 318–22.
39. See also a more recent essay by Edström 1997.
40. See Adorno 2002g.
41. Queens of the Stone Age, Songs for the Deaf (Interscope Records, 2002), CD.
42. See further Goehr 2004.
43. Hoeckner 2002, 12–50, considers at length the issue of hope via the close analysis of a number of canonic nineteenth-century German compositions—Fidelio, for example. Particularly striking is a consistently insightful discussion of how Benjamin’s image of the falling star, which he borrowed from Goethe, repeatedly reappears in Adorno’s philosophy of Beethoven as a trope of transcendence. In Hoeckner’s words: “Only at the moment of its fall does a star shine the brightest. Only then does it become a source of hope” (23).

44. The full typology is: (1) the expert listener; (2) the good listener; (3) the culture consumer; (4) the emotional listener; (5) the resentment listener; (6) the jazz expert and jazz fan (in fact, similar to type five); (7) the entertainment listener; and (8) the indifferent, the unmusical or the antimusical.

45. For an attempt to relate a portion of Adorno’s typology to actual listeners, see Lindstrom 1986.
46. See also on this point Adorno 1988, 42–43.
47. Adorno 1997, 160: “Art’s affirmative element and the affirmative element of the domination of nature are one in asserting that what was inflicted on nature was all for the good; by re-enacting it in the realm of the imagination, art makes it its own and becomes a song of triumph.”
48. Adorno is, of course, reversing Hegel’s famous dictum in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, “The True is the whole” (Hegel 1977, 11).

49. Adorno 1988, 175: “If my conclusions are not premature, whatever the culture industry sets before people in their free time is indeed consumed and accepted but with a kind of reservation. . . . Apparently the integration of consciousness and free time has not yet wholly succeeded. The real interests of individuals are still strong enough to resist, up to a point, their total appropriation. . . . I think that there is a chance here for political maturity that ultimately could do its part to help free time turn into freedom.” Compare with a similar remarks in Adorno 1991a, 113; and Adorno 1991b, 80.


51. He continues (211): “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.”

52. This text originally appeared in *The Principle of Hope* (Bloch 1986, 3:1103; different translation).

53. Adorno’s debt here to Walter Benjamin is obvious. Adorno (1992c, 248) remarked that, were art not “a source of pleasure for people, in however mediated a form, it would not have been able to survive in the naked existence it contradicts and resists. This is not something external to it, however, but part of its very definition. . . . It embodies something like freedom in the midst of unfreedom. The fact that through its very existence it stands outside the evil spell that prevails allies it to a promise of happiness, a promise it itself somehow expresses in its expression of despair.”

**Works Cited**


