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Books

PHILOSOPHY OF MODERN MUSIC, by Theodor W. Adorno

SHEED AND WARD, 1973 (£4.50)

Adorno's book consists principally of two essays; one on Schoenberg, written in 1941, and one on Stravinsky, written in 1948. After completing the Stravinsky essay the author wrote an Introduction designed to relate the two halves of the book.

Adorno's approach to his subject-matter is founded in the belief that the cognitive elements of music rest in the historical processes and tendencies articulated in and through the music. Modern music, as an incarnation of the ongoing contemporary social process, thus incorporates the dialectic of the bourgeois domination that is, and the society without domination that might be. Not only is this dialectic present in the antinomies of individual works, but also in the different compositional attitudes of various composers. For Adorno, then, the works of Schoenberg and Stravinsky become representative of two opposing mainstreams of composition prevalent in the Western world during the first half of this century. In Adorno's opinion "... only in such extremes can the essence of music be defined; they alone permit the perception of its content of truth... It is for this reason and not in the illusion of grand personality that only these two composers... are to be discussed. For if the total product of new music... were to be scrutinized in its entirety... these same extremes would again be encountered". (pages 3-4). The one stream - that of Stravinsky - represents reactionary and regressive tendencies, both in its attachment to 'archaic' sounds and forms, and in its avoidance of the inherent contradiction of its position. The other, however, in its conscious attempt to relentlessly pursue its antinomies to their ultimate conclusion, represents the forces of progress.

Adorno's book is, by any standards, difficult. This difficulty lies not only in the intensity and convolution of thought which brings together the apparently disparate realms of sociology and music, but in a style which is uniformly characterised by tortuous syntax and esoteric language. Although the translators have clearly struggled manfully with the original German, there can be little doubt that its complexity - which the translators acknowledge "makes translation seem impossible" has resulted in a prose strained far beyond the limits of readable English. Indeed, for any reader industrious enough to send off a few contributions to Essay's Corner, this book could literally be a good investment.

Upon a first reading it might appear strange that a book which is so obviously

polemic, and the implicit purpose of which might thus be deduced as rational persuasion, should indulge in such an obscure and mystifying style. Such a style, however, is not an entirely unnatural adjunct of Adorno's attitude towards the world and his material as that attitude is conveyed by the book. For despite Adorno's radical stance against the domination of industrial bourgeois society, he adopts an intellectual pose which is part and parcel of that same society. Domination in industrial society depends upon the centralised and authoritarian co-ordination of its members' activities by a privileged elite, a process which in turn is ultimately dependent upon the centralised dissemination of information. Given the high degree of the division of labour upon which industrial society is predicated, the creation of such information falls to a large degree within the province of the academic. There always exists, therefore, the potential for those who create information in our society to have, albeit unconsciously, a vested interest in the prevalent structure of that society. Certified as experts by society at large, there can exist the tendency for some academics to give the impression that their pronouncements have an authoritative weight which is beyond question.

This attitude is patently true of Adorno in the opening pages of his book. The author clearly considers himself to be in a position to determine the relative worth of all 20th century musics and cultural attitudes: "Because the monopolistic means of distributing music stood entirely at the disposal of artistic trash and compromised cultural values, and catered to the socially determined predisposition of the listener, radical music was forced into complete isolation during the final stages of industrialism. For those composers who wanted to survive, such isolation becomes a moral-social pretense for a false peace. This has given rise to a type of musical composition... which has adjusted to mass culture by means of calculated feeble-mindedness." (page 6). Although only Hindemith, Shostakovich and Britten are named, one gains the distinct impression that, outside the twelve note school and Stravinsky (who is dealt with separately), there are few composers who do not fall under this rubric. Adorno is equally dogmatic with regard to popular music: "... the perceptive faculty has been so dulled by the omnipresent hit tune that the concentration necessary for responsible listening has become permeated by traces of recollection of this musical rubbish, and thereby impossible." (page 10). By taking such an attitude, Adorno eschews any phenomenological approach to his subject that would acknowledge the different, but equally authentic and genuine world-senses articulated by different types and schools of composition. Rather than allowing various musical types to, as it were, present their own 'sociological' evidence, Adorno externally imposes upon them a view which is firmly rooted in his position as a member of an authoritarian and hierarchical academic tradition.

The one essential criticism that must thus be made against Adorno is that he does not examine the implications of his own position. Like many sociologists, he falls into the trap of criticising an aspect of his society, in this case music, in terms of the assumptional framework upon which that society is grounded. In this way the status quo not only of the society, but of the author's position in it, is paradoxically reinforced. Where Adorno could be elucidating both the implications of his own position, and those of the music he is examining, he is entrenching his academic role through mystification of his subject-matter - a process for which elaborate verbosity is undeniably

helpful. And whereas he could be acknowledging his culture-specific orientation to the world, and thereby opening up the possibility of realising the value of contradictory world-senses, he implicitly assumes that people in general, and himself in particular, can objectively stand outside both themselves and the society being examined. This assumption does nothing but underline the way in which Adorno's outlook is unconsciously bound to industrial bourgeois society.

In view of Adorno's ambivalent relationship to bourgeois society, it is not surprising to find that he thinks of the Schoenberg school as representing the forces of progress (another industrial concept), since twelve note technique attempts to negate tonality (which encodes and articulates the industrial world-sense) by an extension of trends already inherent in tonality. The interdependent but functionally separated fundamentals of tonality become completely isolated (alienated) and reintegrated to form a musical language where no one fundamental dominates another. Expressionism, in over-emphasising the isolated subjectivity of bourgeois society, forms the transition between late tonality and twelve note technique: "If the drive towards well-integrated construction is to be called objectivity, then objectivity is not simply a counter-movement to Expressionism. It is the other side of the Expressionistic coin. Expressionistic music had interpreted so literally the principle of expression contained in traditionally Romantic music that it assumed the character of a case-study. In so doing, a sudden change takes place. Music, as a case-study in expression is no longer 'expressive'." (page 49). Schoenberg's music attains its 'authenticity' through recognition of this change: "The subject of modern music, upon which the music itself presents a case-study, is the emancipated, isolated, concrete subject of the late bourgeois phase. This concrete subjectivity and the material which is radically and thoroughly formulated by it furnishes Schoenberg with the canon of aesthetic objectivism. The depth of his work is thereby discernible." (page 57). Parallel with Adorno's 'objectivity', Schoenberg's twelve note music seeks to objectively contain its own subjectivity and so stand outside itself. The pervasiveness of the Freudian outlook in both men's work thereby becomes apparent.

In a similar manner the temporal aspects of tonality become over-extended in the twelve note technique. Tonality, through the vertical co-ordination of horizontal lines originating with mensuration, essentially spatialises the temporal flow of those previously more independent lines. Twelve note technique, in its dislocation of centrally dominated fundamentals, and its retrograde rows (these rows, it can be argued, serve to encode and articulate a reversible time - and reversible time is the logical extension and conclusion of a spatialised time) serves to totally extinguish any sense of temporal flow: "The continuum of subjective time-experience is no longer entrusted with the power of collecting musical events, functioning as a unity, and thereby imparting meaning to them... Once again music subdues time, but no longer by substituting music in its perfection for time, but by negating time through the inhibition of all musical moments by means of an omnipresent construction." (page 60). In objectively stepping outside its constitutive subjectivity twelve note music potentially destroys the temporal flow of consciousness.

If it is Adorno's natural affinity with the Schoenberg school (he studied with Berg) that makes his discussion of it so largely perceptive, then it is his blind allegiance to the Schoenbergian aesthetic that renders his discussion of Stravinsky so suspect. Adorno's fundamental criticism of Stravinsky is that his music, in its denial of tonality, nonetheless articulates the domination of bourgeois society. The integrity of the individual subjectivity is threatened: "In Stravinsky's case, subjectivity assumes the character of sacrifice, but - and this is where he sneers at the tradition of humanistic art - the music does not identify with the victim, but rather with the destructive element. Through the liquidation of the victim it rids itself of all intentions - that is, of its own subjectivity." (page 143). The new collectivity thus favours the industrial forces of suppression: "Authenticity (in Stravinsky's music) is gained surreptitiously through the denial of the subjective pole. The collective standpoint is suddenly seized as though by attack; this results in the renunciation of comfortable conformity with individualistic society. But at the very point where this is achieved, a secondary, and, to be sure, highly uncomfortable conformity results: the conformity of a blind and integral society - a society, as it were, of eunuchs and headless men." (page 159). This, for Adorno, is the essential contradiction inherent in Stravinsky's music, a contradiction which impairs musical meaning. Stravinsky "is drawn in that direction where music - in its retarded stage, far behind the fully developed bourgeois subject - functions as an element lacking intention, arousing only bodily animation instead of offering meaning. He is so attracted to that sphere in which meaning has become so ritualized, that it cannot be experienced as the specific meaning of the musical act." (page 140).

It is from this position that Adorno criticises aspects of Stravinsky's musical language. A lack of thematic material compromises completeness of form: "His music is devoid of recollection and consequently lacking in any time continuum of permanence. Its course lies in reflexes... This lack of thematic material, a lack which actually excludes the breadth of form, the continuity of the process - indeed, it excludes 'life' itself from the music." (page 164). Again we are amazingly told that "Stravinsky's music remains a peripheral phenomenon... because it avoids the dialectical confrontation with the musical progress of time" (page 187); "such suspension of musical time consciousness corresponds to the total consciousness of a bourgeoisie which... denies the time process itself, and finds its utopia in the withdrawal of time into space." (page 190).

Adorno is unable even to consider that Stravinsky is articulating in his music a world-sense which he, the author, has not comprehended. He is unable to conceive that, for Stravinsky, the conscious variation of explicitly stated themes (a process which, for the listener, requires a long memory span, and so the ability to stand outside the temporal flow of his consciousness) and the consciously 'rational' ordering of temporality were unnecessary devices for what he sought to achieve. Only someone whose world-sense was so firmly rooted in the spatialised time of post-Renaissance thought could so paradoxically conceive of Stravinsky's music as 'timeless' and so possessing a temporality that 'vanishes into space'. Adorno cannot sense that immersion in the temporal flow of consciousness requires a releasing of consciously controlled time.

Perhaps the statement which best sums up the narrowness of Adorno's outlook is the following: "The total energy exerted (in Stravinsky's music) is placed in the service of blind and aimless obedience to blind rules; this energy is devoted to Sisyphus-like tasks. The best of the infantile compositions exhibit the delirious and confining gesture of chasing-one's-tail. This provides the alienated effect of not being able to escape one's own grasp." (page 179). Alienation does not derive from a lack of self-distancing and objectivity, but rather from an excess of it. And because distancing and objectivity is, in both a personal and social sense, what Adorno subscribes to, he cannot help but feel alienated in the presence of a music which is concerned with the revelatory process of continual Becoming, rather than the over-extension of the incarnatory process of static Being.

Adorno's musical 'ethnocentricity' is reflected in his attitude towards the consciousnesses of pre-literate and industrial man. Pre-literate consciousness, in Adorno's view, is simply a proto-version or undeveloped form of industrial consciousness: "The belief that the archaic simply lies at the aesthetic disposal of the ego - in order that the ego might regenerate itself through it - is superficial; it is nothing more than a wish fantasy. The force of the historical process which has crystallized the firm contours of the ego, has objectified itself in the individual, holding him back and separating him from the primeval world contained within him. Obvious archaic impulses cannot be reconciled with civilization." (page 168). Again we are in the hands of our old 19th century friend - progress.

The critical sociological and anthropological traditions of this century have dispensed with the notions of inherent social progress and the unquestioned superiority of modern Western man. Furthermore, in recent years, Marshall McLuhan and others have argued that the structuring of our consciousness and our society has during this century begun to change to something comparable with that of the consciousnesses and societies of pre-literate men. Instead of living in a contradictory world of individual purpose and social domination, of which the watchword with regard to both man and environment is that of conscious alienated control, we are entering a period where the immediacy of inter-personal relationships and the acceptance of rapid and frequently unpredictable change is fast becoming the order of the day. We are beginning to live more within ourselves and our world, and this is a situation which is simply incompatible with the domination of bourgeois society. For the increased intensity of man's relationships both with himself and the events of the world has resulted in many sectors of society becoming too aware to remain ciphers in a centralised system.

In many ways Stravinsky's music articulates this changed structure, a structure which is so clearly anathema for Adorno. Neither sociologically nor musically does Adorno escape the bourgeois - all must be highly conscious, 'objective', 'rational' and painful effort. Anyone who does not face 'the problem' in this fashion is reactionary and regressive. Adorno cannot conceive that to Stravinsky, who was brought up in a country which did not have a Renaissance, his formulation of the problem of late bourgeois society might have little significance or relevance.

JOHN SHEPHERD