

How Music Survives Capitalism

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2002 AT 4 A.M.

Every artist in this age of commerce lives with a divided consciousness. On the one hand, you sense the truth embodied in your own artistic work. On the other, you're aware of the falsification inevitable in the process through which corporations package art for the public as commodities. Across this gap lies a topologically impossible bridge worthy of an M.C. Escher drawing: The artist would like to have his work offered to the public by the big record company, the major presenter, the famous museum, accompanied by all the PR trappings that both flatter the artist and reduce him to a brand name—while holding on to his work's subsequent claim to truth. This is the tortured landscape we all live in. And it is a recurring comfort to rediscover it mapped out in the writings of Theodor Adorno.

OK, so Adorno (1903-69) was a snob. He dismissed jazz with unforgivable snideness. To put it more sympathetically, he was so completely immersed in an authentic European paradigm of musical meaning that he couldn't help but see any other use for music as a degradation of that one. (For those who want their Adorno without the bad attitude, read his superb American explicator, Rose Rosengard Subotnik.) But he was deeply aware of the crisis art would face under a worldwide American model of manipulative consumerism, which he saw as an equal and complementary threat to fascism. And in a luxuriously thick new volume, *Theodor W. Adorno: Essays on Music*, selected and edited by Richard Leppert with some articles translated into English for the first time by Susan H. Gillespie (University of California Press), you are reminded of truths about art that our cultural institutions wish you'd forget.

Months before the Allies declared victory in WW II, Adorno laid out (in "What National Socialism Has Done to the Arts") a frightening scenario that would survive the squelching of fascism. The rise of technology, he argued, had destroyed the humanistic balance between art and science, relegating art to a contingent position as entertainment. A culture willing to sacrifice its aims to the blind advance of technology would lose the thread of humanism that constituted mankind's memory, leaving a spiritual vacuum into which either fascism or capitalist consumerism could pour new values with little resistance—except from artists and scholars whose communion with works of the past gave them a foundation of truth to rebel

from. He foresaw the damage that would be done by a system that reduced every work of art, even within the artist's own mind, to its exchange value.

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In the face of the resulting fetishism of high culture, with its humorlessly tuxedoed orchestral functionaries, Adorno writes (in "On the Contemporary Relationship of Philosophy and Music"), "composers have the agonizing choice. They can play deaf and soldier on as if music were still music. Or they can pursue the leveling on their own account, turn music into a normal condition and in the process hold out for quality, when possible. Or they can ultimately oppose the tendency by a turn to the extreme, with the prospect of . . . becoming dessicated as a specialty." Now read that statement back over and consider whether, in 1953, Adorno didn't lay out the social tensions underlying what would eventually become the survival strategies of Midtown, Downtown, and Uptown composers, respectively. Or look at this 1945 recipe for a Downtown scene: "The present stage of technical civilization may call for a very ascetic art developed in the loopholes of poverty and isolation, as counter-balance against the business culture which tends to cover the whole world."

The challenge is to deal with Adorno dialectically, and not just as a cynical excuse for further burrowing into alienated contempt. He was farsighted, but the world's development was not the one-way road he assumed. At one point he analogizes, "the economic production of the future can no more return to primitive, pre-division-of-labor forms of production, in order to avoid the alienation of human beings from consumer goods, than art can"—and yet today there are progressive areas of society reverting to more holistic models of production. Similarly, I would argue (and do every week) that much recent music reverses that alienation pattern without falling into slots prepared by the corporate world. To facilitate that ongoing struggle, it might not be a bad idea for us all to have Adorno's critique in the back of our minds.



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