

Musica Negativa

By Kyle Gann

Theodor W. Adorno

Speaking on a panel a few years ago, I quoted Marxist heavy-weight Adorno, and the art critic next to me smirked condescendingly: "So, musicians are still into the Frankfurt School, are they?"

Yes and no, wise guy. Despite its political regressions and Euro-tunnel vision, the Frankfurt School is still a must for musicians, for a simple reason. You can hear the appeal on a new Wergo CD that contains about a third of the musical output of Theodor Weisengrund Adorno, composer. Adorno (1903-69)—a pianist capable of Beethoven's Op. 111 Sonata, a composition student of Alban Berg, an apostle of Schoenberg, and musical adviser to Thomas Mann for *Doctor Faustus*—was the only philosopher since Nietzsche to write a body of music. (Nietzsche left us about 15 songs, a few piano pieces, a violin sonata, a partial mass, and an unorchestrated tone poem on Byron's *Manfred*.) Accordingly, Adorno is the only philosopher since Nietzsche who, when he wrote about music, did it from the inside and with authority.

This disc presents for the first time the complete volume one of Adorno's published compositions. (Volume two has 33 popular, political, and art songs, and there are other chamber and piano pieces that he was less satisfied with.)

The only major work here is the *Two Pieces for String Quartet*, Op. 2, dating from Adorno's studies with Berg in 1925-6, and played by Frankfurt's Buchberger Quartet. Written a few years after Schoenberg's initial 12-tone attempts, it's one of the period's most striking examples of free atonality. In one movement, 12-note melodies with no pitches repeated run rampant and combine in complex counterpoint, but there is no 12-tone organization as such. Textures and rhythm are Bergian, but the pitch usage comes coincidentally closer to the American Carl Ruggles. The second movement, written a year earlier, treats a non-12-tone theme with 12-tone techniques such as inversion, retrograde, and octave displacement in a dozen brief variations.

In an odd way this Op. 2 makes clearer not only what Adorno hoped the new music would achieve, but what he wanted to do in his critique of culture. Tonality, with its dubious claims to acoustic naturalness, he saw as a bourgeois fraud that Schoenberg heroically debunked (making Adorno one of the early thinkers to see European music as just one possibility among many). But he also saw the 12-tone method of Schoenberg's late period as a step backward from the liberation that atonality had promised, reading in it the death of the subject and Schoenberg's final "identification with the forces of domination." Adorno's philosophy has been

called atonal for its refusal to reconcile opposites or reduce constellations of ideas to a single principle, and the thorny, unparaphrasable quality of his language is mirrored in this piece's free-wheeling, multirowed counterpoint.

It's hard music to follow. As in much 12-tone work, focus on pitch is blurred by the constant reshaping of rhythm and contour. Adorno insisted that music should be difficult, that it should call into question the artificial work/leisure distinction by making the listener sweat; otherwise it became a pawn of the culture industry. (He also foresaw, however, that difficulty itself could become a culture fetish and be rendered harmless, which has since happened.) However, the *Six Short Orchestra Pieces*, Op. 4 (1925-29), Berg-thick and Webern-brief, are easier. Each of these miniatures, the shortest only 41 seconds long, stems from a recognizable and recapitulated motive, and if there's an original feature to Adorno's music, it's his un-Schoenbergian tendency to keep rows and motives at their original pitch level, without transposing.

Further, the disc contains three choral songs to poems by Theodor Däubler, smoothly atonal and chromatic in the style of Webern's *Entflieht auf Leichten Kähnen*; and two 1933 songs from Adorno's projected Mark Twain opera, *Der Schatz des Indianer Joe* (The Treasure of Indian Joe). Walter Benjamin dissuaded Adorno from finishing the opera because he saw in it "a reduction to the idyllic"; more immediately, it sounds a little silly to hear Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn sing about tomcats in the angst-ridden intervals of Vien-



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nese expressionism, the more so since singers Maximilian Kiener and Holger Neiser preserve the innocent lilt of their characters. Finally, 12 of the 40 minutes are taken up by 1941 orchestrations of Schumann's *Album for the Young*.

Adorno's biographer Martin Jay flatly calls him unsuccessful as a composer, and I didn't come here to argue (although I do find the Däubler songs charming). His music and aesthetics both have to be understood in the context of his desire to prolong what he called new music's "heroic decade," 1907-17. As a critic, his insights into jazz were crippled by his Eurocentric assumption that rhythm is no more than its metrical notation, and jazz fans will rightly never forgive him. His insistence that music spells out its truth content via formal structure will never sit well with rock musi-

cians (though Cage, the one composer after Webern that Adorno held out hopes for, took from Schoenberg the same idea).

Still, apologies aside, he was the only writer whose philosophy drew inspiration from the act of composing. It took a composer to realize as clearly as Adorno did the limitations on the autonomy of the creative act. He knew how much a composition resists its composer's control, the extent to which a piece is not a mere object under its creator's domination, in a way few critics have; and he patterned his "negative dialectics" after that two-way subject-object relationship. Only in his writings can musicians read the connections their inmost thoughts make with the century's larger political and philosophical currents. And in this disc, negligible as it may be in other respects, you hear those connections as well. ■

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