

Book Review

Theodor W. Adorno. *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*. Translated with Introduction and Annotation by Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Theodor W. Adorno. *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Theodor W. Adorno. *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. London and New York: Verso, 1992.¹

Reviewed by James Buhler

Today, nearly twenty-five years after his death, Theodor W. Adorno's writings seem finally to be receiving systematic scholarly attention, even in a field as supposedly closed to critical theory such as ours. As the splendid bibliography to Lambert Zuidervaart's *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* amply demonstrates, scholarly work on Adorno never entirely ceased.² But it is fair to say that Adorno, though widely regarded as one of the seminal thinkers of the twentieth century, has remained on the periphery of scholarship—in philosophy, even Marxist theory, fully as much as in musicology and music theory. In his penetrating new study of Adorno entitled *Late Marxism*, Fredric Jameson, a Marxist literary theorist who draws frequently on Adorno's work, attributes this marginal status to “Adorno's sense of

¹The following abbreviations will be used for citations to these texts: B, *Berg*; M, *Mahler*; Q, *Quasi una Fantasia*.

²Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

Apocalypse,” which “seemed an encumbrance, not to say an embarrassment, during the [political] struggles of [the 1960s and 1970s].”³ One might argue, however, that Adorno has fared better in the pages of musical journals than anywhere else except perhaps New Left journals such as *Telos* and *New German Critique*.

Rose Rosengard Subotnik’s path-breaking essays on Adorno, recently collected to form the bulk of her *Developing Variations*,⁴ for instance, first appeared in such prestigious musicology journals as the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* and *19th-Century Music*. The frequently cited books of Carl Dahlhaus, many of which are now available in translation, also show a marked influence of Adorno, although it must be admitted that Adorno has always enjoyed a greater reputation in Germany than in English-speaking countries, due, no doubt, to the often remarked difficulty of his German prose and the general inadequacy in the existing translations of his works. Nevertheless, it remains the case that aside from the work of Subotnik, the translations of Dahlhaus, and a smattering of other articles, Adorno’s influence on English-speaking musicology and music theory has remained safely confined to the footnotes. And even in those articles where Adorno’s thought “has surged up from the footnotes to activate the musicological text itself,”⁵ the works engaged have tended to be those that Jameson calls “the bleak retrospective monuments to the high moderns, such as the dolmens *Philosophy of Modern Music* erects to Schoenberg and Stravinsky.”⁶

It is therefore especially welcome to see English-language translations of *Quasi una Fantasia*, a thematically linked collection

³Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 4, 5.

⁴Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁵Joseph Kerman, “American Musicology in the 1990s,” *Journal of Musicology* 9/2 (1991): 132.

⁶Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 246.

of essays, as well as of the important monographs on Berg and Mahler. For in these three works, all originally published in the last decade of his life,⁷ we meet an Adorno who has previously been unavailable to the English-speaking reader, one who expresses a clear affinity for the complicated aesthetic impurity of composers such as Mahler and Berg rather than the high modernist absolutes of Schoenberg and Webern.⁸ In fact, the impulse toward a rigorous musical impurity recurs frequently in Adorno's thinking. It lies at the heart of his writings on Mahler and Berg, for instance, and seems to have informed his decision to study with Berg, who, in Adorno's view, had discovered a path for music between Mahler and Schoenberg (B, 13). This impulse also helps elucidate, among other things, the otherwise enigmatic fact that Adorno, that supposed elitist critic of all things popular or American, actually contemplated composing a *Singspiel*—he actually composed several songs for it—based on the Injun Joe character of Mark Twain.⁹

Here, in these three works, is an Adorno, who, as Jameson remarks, “included a place for the possible emergence of the postmodern,” especially in his aesthetic writings.¹⁰ And, in fact, it would be difficult to deny a strong resemblance between Adorno's critical theory and certain tendencies in postmodernism, a resemblance that, in fact, makes comparisons between Adorno and postmodernism

⁷Mahler: *Eine Musikalische Physiognomik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1960); *Quasi una Fantasia* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963); *Alban Berg: Der Meister des kleinstens Übergang* (Vienna: Verlag Elisabeth Lafite, 1968).

⁸Jameson, for instance, argues that these three books, especially the final essay of *Quasi una Fantasia*, “Vers une musique informelle,” “make it clear that we were wrong to confuse Adorno's historical assessment of the central significance of Schoenberg with any particular personal taste or inclination for the Viennese composer and theoretician, whose dead end he repeatedly characterized as such” (*Late Marxism*, 246).

⁹Theodor W. Adorno, *Der Schatz des Indianer-Joe; Schauspiel nach Mark Twain*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979).

¹⁰Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 247.

almost irresistible. Adorno admires Mahler for his employment of certain compositional strategies that have subsequently been defined as characteristically postmodern—for instance, his striking appropriation of banal and anachronistic elements. “Desperately it [Mahler’s music] draws to itself what culture has spurned, as wretched, injured, and mutilated The art-work, chained to culture, seeks to burst the chain and show compassion for the derelict residue; in Mahler each measure is an opening of arms” (M, 38). What in the music of previous composers was “involuntarily vulgar,” Adorno writes, “becomes in Mahler a provocative alliance with vulgar music. His symphonies shamelessly flaunt what rang in all ears, scraps of melody from great music, shallow popular songs, street ballads, hits” (M, 35). The vulgar element, Adorno suggests, is fundamental to Mahler’s symphonic conception and irreducible from it. “Not despite the kitsch to which it is drawn is Mahler’s music great, but because its construction unties the tongue of the kitsch” (M, 39). Adorno’s apparent preference for music such as Mahler’s that, as Jameson puts it, “absorbs bits and pieces of a degraded mass culture” suggests an interpenetration of popular and high culture that fits, almost too easily, into postmodern theory.¹¹

According to Jameson, it is the emergence of the postmodern condition, what he elsewhere calls “the cultural logic of late capitalism,”¹² that has made Adorno’s work especially relevant for today. Adorno’s work, he says, stages the problem of an absent totality, what postmodern theory identifies as the dissolution of totality and metanarratives, in terms of the modernist crisis of representation. Adorno’s critical theory, oriented toward “the detection of the absent presence of totality within the aporias of consciousness or of its products,”¹³ offers a possible corrective to a representational problem

¹¹Ibid., 172.

¹²Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

¹³Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 252.

within postmodernism itself—the representation of an absent totality.¹⁴ “For what Adorno teaches us ... is that questions of representation become interesting and agonizing, all-important, only when a concept of totality is maintained in place as something more than a mere ‘regulative idea.’”¹⁵

In Adorno’s view, art provides a cryptic image of the presence of this otherwise absent and inaccessible totality. This is one of the reasons why art, and aesthetic thinking in general, plays such a significant role in Adorno’s theory. But this image of totality remains false, only the feigned illusion of success, so long as it presents that totality as attainable, free of contradiction. It is here then that we begin to see a social function of art emerge in Adorno’s theory. This function is to furnish society with otherwise inaccessible representations of itself as a totality.

Such a function for art means, however, that no artwork can be both successful and true. The contradictions of society, Adorno argues, extend to the very core of compositional technique in the form of contradictions in the artistic material. When an artwork fulfills the strictures of artistic technique, the contradictions that nevertheless appear within the artwork demonstrate the inconsistencies in the artistic system. A work that is true must confront the contradictions of material; but in exposing them the work will be as unsuccessful as the society that produced it.¹⁶

But the separation of truth and success also allows Adorno to show why apparently successful works can nevertheless be considered artistic failures. Because the contradictions of the artistic material remain unexamined in the successful work, the success of these works is, according to Adorno, feigned rather than actually realized. Successful works—images of a totality free of contradiction—are as

¹⁴Ibid., 248.

¹⁵Ibid., 244.

¹⁶As Jameson suggests, a “fully achieved,” rather than successful, work of art in Adorno’s system “draws its deepest truth from the contradiction as such, and from its unreserved commitment to it—something which virtually guarantees that it cannot be

untrue as the society from which they derive. Such works make the underlying artistic system, and so also the society that produced it, appear as what it is, in fact, not: consistent and true.

Mahler, Adorno suggests, initiates a critique against “the illusion [*Schein*] of the successful work” (M, 5). Mahler does this, he says, by acknowledging artistic illusion both as something humanly produced and as something that does not actually exist. Mahler’s rebellion against the illusion of the successful work is manifest most strikingly as rupture, especially in what Adorno calls the “breakthrough” (*Durchbruch*)—an “unmediated ... peripeteia-like turn”¹⁷ from catastrophe to transcendence that occurs, for instance, at the moment when the trumpet enters in the dungeon scene of *Fidelio* (M, 5). Introducing rupture into the work offers its own perils, however, since the norms that rupture transgresses may also be turned back against the work, permitting those who uncritically accept those norms to dismiss Mahler’s critique on this account. “It is true of Mahler as of almost no other [significant composer] that what exceeds accepted standards also falls slightly short of them; the refined taste of academicians, headshakingly, is apt to convict Mahler’s breakthroughs of childishness” (M, 19). Rather than arguing that Mahler’s music is not really broken and ugly or that it represents some kind of new aesthetic standard—incidentally, this remains a characteristic gambit of Mahler research today—Adorno takes a more difficult path. He acknowledges a quality of brokenness and ugliness in Mahler’s music but attempts to transform such “defects” into the critical gesture of his music.

“Through the insufficiency of the successful work,” Adorno writes, “the insufficient one, condemned by that judgment, becomes significant” (M,12). Because the successful work must uncritically accept illusion, we find a critique of illusion not in the successful work but rather in those works that, at first glance, appear to fail. Lack of success in an artwork, Adorno argues, should be investigated in order

achieved or complete or successful in the sentimental sense of a traditional normative aesthetics” (*Late Marxism*, 200).

¹⁷Bernd Sponheuer, “Der Durchbruch als primäre Formkategorie Gustav Mahlers,”

to discover whether the insufficiency lies in the misapplication of artistic technique or in the artistic technique itself.¹⁸ Clearly Adorno is unconcerned with instances of artistic ineptitude. He does not, for instance, attribute the broken tone of Mahler's music to compositional inadequacy but rather to a compositional standard that has equated truth and success in a manner that cannot actually be realized. The failure of Mahler's music, its "brokenness," is at the same time the location of its truth-content: it exposes the inability of immanent logic to guarantee the success of the self-contained work. What is true in Mahler's music are those moments when it refuses to harmonize with, and so affirm, a contradictory system. The expression of truth, "escaping illusion by confessing to its illusoriness," can be achieved only at the expense of compositional failure while the aesthetic standard of the self-contained, autonomous work "[insists] on its own truth, only to become in its entirety a deception" (M, 12). Lack of success thus uncovers a break between success, an affirmation of what is, and truth, the critical insight that what exists now might be other than it is.

Hence, Adorno sets as one of his tasks the demonstration that the breakthrough affects the immanent compositional logic of those works within which it appears. Of the first movement of Mahler's First Symphony, for instance, Adorno writes, "the idea of breakthrough, which dictates the entire structure of the movement, transcends the traditional form while fleetingly sketching its outline" (M,6). Adorno shows that Mahler has in fact accepted the norms of musical composition, in particular the norm of immanent coherence, but has turned those norms against themselves; the contradictions that arise in Mahler's works, Adorno suggests, emanate from objective contradictions of the musical material that Mahler has inherited from society and not from Mahler himself. "What the immanence of society blocks cannot be achieved by an immanence of form derived from it"

in *Form und Idee in Gustav Mahlers Instrumentalmusik*, ed. Klaus Hinrich Stahmer (Wilhelmshaven: Heinrichshofens Verlag, 1980), 120.

¹⁸"Not the worst criterion of art is to ask whether its failure is adventitious or whether its chance nature gives expression to a necessity" (Q, 99).

(M, 6). Inadequacies in a work of art need not signify failure on the part of the artist.

When Adorno refers to contradictions, Zuidervaart suggests that he “is not simply referring to logical incongruities that could be cleared up by more careful thought. Instead the reference is to unavoidable conflicts in a historical society that are brought to consciousness by philosophy and art.”¹⁹ In his well-known essay on cultural criticism from *Prisms*, for instance, Adorno argues that apparent artistic flaws may instead “derive ... from the irreconcilability of the object’s moments.”²⁰ It is the task of philosophical critique to pursue “the logic of [the object’s] aporias, the insolubility of the [artistic] task itself. In such antinomies criticism perceives those of society.”²¹ Thus, as in Mahler, truth, the confession of illusion, may use apparent failure, brokenness, to attain an artistic significance that apparently successful works also seek; but, due to their uncritical acceptance of illusion, such successful works fail to reach the same level of artistic significance. The artistically significant work, Adorno argues, “is not one which expresses contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure.”²² Those who find Mahler’s music objectionable, Adorno claims, can only object to the fact that Mahler uncovers such contradictoriness rather

¹⁹Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, 51.

²⁰Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (1967; reprint, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 32. Zuidervaart finds a similar sentiment expressed in *Aesthetic Theory*: “The profound artwork highlights its contradictory moments, neither eliminating them nor leaving them disconnected. In a profound artwork, antagonisms are brought to the surface and placed in the horizon of a possible reconciliation. By virtue of a nonrepressive synthesis of antagonisms, profound artworks oppose a world where antagonisms are forcibly integrated.” In particular, “unresolved social antagonisms return in artworks as the immanent problems of artistic form” (*Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, 200, 123).

²¹Adorno, *Prisms*, 32.

²²*Ibid.*

than concealing it.

This rich mix of complex philosophical critique and sophisticated aesthetic sensibility is everywhere apparent in Adorno's work. Add to this the difficulty of navigating the often-remarked opaqueness of his German prose and it is little wonder that his works have proven to be so resistant to adequate translation. If his arcane literary illusions do not happen to trip up the translator, then Adorno's thorough mastery of the technical vocabulary of music and philosophy surely will. Lack of knowledge in at least one of these areas has, in fact, marred most of the earlier translations of Adorno's work, and, unfortunately for those working in music, the most usual deficiency has been in musical terminology. Fortunately, the recent round of Adorno translations is much more satisfying in this regard.

All three of the translations under review here have been rendered into highly readable English with minimal changes to Adorno's complex sentence and paragraph structure. The musical terminology poses little problem in *Alban Berg*, whose translators, Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey, also worked on the Berg-Schoenberg correspondence. Their decision to render *Meister des Kleinsten Übergang* as "Master of the Smallest Link" will doubtlessly have its detractors. But the brief defense the translators offer for this decision in their "note on the translation" (B, xv) serves to mitigate any confusion in the text itself.

The translator of *Quasi una Fantasia*, Rodney Livingstone, who previously translated Adorno's *Versuch über Wagner*, wisely consulted a musicologist in preparing his manuscript and the result clearly shows. Only the decision to translate the German *Variante* with "variation" rather than the more literal "variant" seems seriously open to question. The distinction between variant and variation is crucial for Adorno in that variant is a concept he associates with the work of Mahler whereas variation is the concept he identifies with the Schoenberg school.²³ When he points to Mahler's use of variant—or indeed

²³Mahler's technique, according to Adorno in *Mahler*, "had its *differentia specifica* from that of other composers in the variant, as opposed to the variation" (M, 86).

Zemlinsky's later appropriation of it—Adorno is pointing to a concept operating outside of Schoenberg's orbit, to a potential of the musical language present in Mahler's music but one that Schoenberg's powerful idea of developing variation later eclipsed.

Although Edmund Jephcott has somewhat less success translating the musical terminology than do either Brand and Hailey or Livingstone—*Stufen* in particular seems to elude him—even here the breakdowns are relatively minor and infrequent. In fact, the most serious translation problems here involve aesthetic rather than musical terminology. *Schein*, which is one of Adorno's most aesthetic concepts, is rendered inconsistently throughout the Mahler book—sometimes as “illusion,” sometimes as “appearance.” While “illusion” or even “aesthetic illusion” is probably the preferable reading for *Schein*, what is especially troubling is the potential for confusion with *Erscheinung*. Unfortunately, Jephcott does not always avoid this confusion. In fact, *Schein* and *Erscheinung* are even occasionally both translated as “appearance” in the same paragraph (e.g., M, 123).

Too much consistency, on the contrary, is at work in Jephcott's use of “content” as the translation for both *Inhalt* and *Gehalt*. As we shall see, however, the distinction between these two terms plays a crucial role in Adorno's aesthetic theory, and Jephcott's failure to make it renders Adorno's complex aesthetic thought strangely one-dimensional.

Zuidervaart, for instance, illustrates just how consequential this distinction is to Adorno's thinking on aesthetics, especially music. Two dialectics, he argues, hold an especially prominent position in Adorno's theory of art: “One is a dialectic between discursive and nondiscursive knowledge. The other is a dialectic between mimesis and rationality within art as a mode of discursive knowledge.”²⁴ It is the second of these dialectics that concerns us at the moment, though we will return to the first one below. In Adorno's aesthetic system, this second dialectic appears in art as “a tension between mimetic expression and rational construction or, in traditional terms, between content (*Inhalt*)

²⁴Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 122-23.

and form (*Form*).” *Inhalt*, Zuidervaart says, “can be approached from two independent sides, as either an artistic sublimation of objectified impulses or an artistic transmutation of objectified elements and relations in their non-identity.... ‘Content’ [*Inhalt*] comes to stand for mimetic non-identity within works of art.”²⁵ Likewise form, what Adorno often calls a “sedimentation of content,” “is important for Adorno because it is a way in which artworks both oppose society and communicate with it.”²⁶

Conversely, *Gehalt* refers to the tension between form and content in Adorno’s system. This term, for which Zuidervaart offers the convincing gloss of “import,” thus permits Adorno to conceptualize the movement between form and content as a theoretical category related to, yet distinct from, both form and content. It is imperative to realize that Adorno always maintains this careful distinction between *Inhalt* and *Gehalt*. In fact, Adorno’s conception of *Gehalt* is one of the primary factors that set his aesthetic theory apart from a formalism such as Hanslick’s.²⁷ As Zuidervaart notes, *Gehalt*, unlike *Inhalt*, is “not just musical. It is also social.”²⁸ Considered in relation to the dynamic shape (*Gestalt*) of the work, *Gehalt* also engenders a new dynamically conceived dialectic that is opposed to the traditional, architectonic one of *Inhalt* and *Form*. Zuidervaart summarizes the complex relations among these factors in Adorno’s theory as follows: “Unless one traces the contours of content [*Inhalt*], form [*Form*], and their dialectic [*Gehalt*], one misses the way in which

²⁵Ibid., 124.

²⁶Ibid., 123.

²⁷For Zuidervaart, “Adorno’s definition goes beyond Hanslick’s because it implies a doubling within both content and form. Such a doubling makes possible a dialectic not only between content and form but also between musical import [*Gehalt*] and historical society. Nonmusical feelings and thoughts have intramusical significance, and the import of musical works has a social meaning” (Ibid., 127).

²⁸Ibid.

social tensions ‘shape’ the artwork itself.’²⁹ The tension between dynamic and architectonic facets of the musical work—between *Gehalt* and *Gestalt*, on the one hand, and between *Inhalt* and *Form*, on the other—in turn constitutes the social dialectic of the musical work. This social dialectic, which leaves its trace on particular compositions as moments of flux, ultimately determines the impetus or flow (*Zug*) of the musical work.

We are now in a position to see why Jephcott’s decision to translate *Inhalt* and *Gehalt* as “content” and *Form* and *Gestalt* as “form” is so misguided. Collapsing Adorno’s terminological distinctions in this way eliminates precisely the intricate series of dialectics that Adorno employs to reveal the social dialectic operating beneath the simpler, and more immediately aesthetic, distinction between form and content. Without distinguishing *Inhalt* and *Gehalt*, on the one hand, and *Form* and *Gestalt*, on the other, we lose sight of the social dialectic at work in the play between form and content. True, traces of the social dialectic can still be found in Adorno’s discussion of symphonic flow and musical flux as well as in the important role that Adorno assigns to rupture, brokenness and even the banal in Mahler’s music; but without the tension between the dynamic and the architectonic that Adorno finds so characteristic of Mahler’s work, the discussion of all this remains merely suggestive and strangely detached from an all-prevailing dialectic of form and content. Adorno’s careful dismantling of this formalist dialectic thus fails to register in this translation. It is to be regretted that Adorno at times seems reduced by this translation into a cramped and all-too-common formalist position of Jephcott’s rather than Adorno’s own making.

If *Mahler* represents a concrete attempt to work through the dialectic of form and content until it reveals the underlying social dimension hidden within that dialectic, *Quasi una Fantasia* addresses the first of the dialectics that Zuidervaat attributes to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*—namely the one between discursive and non-discursive knowledge. In fact, *Quasi una Fantasia* probes an issue

²⁹Ibid., 123.

closely related to this dialectic: how to write music once serialism, which had once seemed to redeem music, has itself threatened “to become universal and mechanical”(Q, 135).

In *Quasi una Fantasia*, Adorno seems to be seeking a theoretical alternative to the impasse in which the new music was caught around 1960: almost made irrelevant by the growing influence of popular music, the new music found itself unable to advance without further reifying its compositional system as, for instance, in total serialism. The system of “formal” musical composition, which is characterized by an ever-increasing rational control of the material, has suffered what Adorno calls a “loss of tension” and can, in his view, no longer be sustained (Q, 283).

We should not infer from his critique of total serialism that Adorno thought music composition either unneeded or impossible. Adorno makes this nowhere clearer than in the second group of essays in *Quasi una Fantasia* gathered under the rubric “Evocations.” Essays on Mahler, Zemlinsky, Schreker and Stravinsky explore what each of these composers might contribute to the theory of a post-serial music.³⁰ Although these four composers are each connected in some fashion with the new music, Adorno does not consider, except peripherally, their relationship to it. Rather he seeks in their music those paths not taken by the new music, those paths that might, in fact, allow one to escape the rigid oppositions of modernism and still permit one to find a way to write music today when composing formal, systematic music characteristic of the great German tradition no longer seems possible. Adorno’s essays focus on those musical possibilities contained in the works of these composers that the new music has cast aside in the pursuit of its historical dialectic.³¹ It is in this sense that we might

³⁰Stravinsky represents something of an exception here in that Adorno, though reconsidering many of the charges he made against Stravinsky in *Philosophy of Modern Music*, remains highly critical of his music. Instead, Adorno points to those paths that his music might have opened up but which Stravinsky consistently and systematically kept closed.

³¹Adorno writes that Zemlinsky’s music, for instance, “contains impulses which brought the new into being. They were then left by the wayside, but their sacrifice

understand Jameson's comment that "much of Adorno's philosophical work turns precisely on [the] question of how we are to engage a living thought that is no longer historically current" is relevant to Adorno's work on music as well as philosophy.³² What Adorno finds preserved in the works of Mahler, Zemlinsky, and Schreker especially are traces of past, forgotten, but still unresolved artistic problems. "On occasion," Adorno writes, "the most progressive kind of art seeks refuge in the residues of what has been left unfinished or unworked out. This bypasses the sphere of what is regarded as up to date by taking up and rethinking what has been left to one side" (Q, 98-99). The unfinished problems that most interest Adorno are those that were abandoned not because their solutions proved especially vexing, but rather because other, more pressing problems arose and eclipsed them in importance. Adorno's engagement with such works is not merely nostalgic, then, in that he does not seek to revert to an earlier state of music but only to find forgotten, unfinished problems there that still hold potential relevance for today.

The musical possibilities Adorno does find in the music of these composers form the basis of what he calls a *musique informelle* or informal music. Informal music is, in Adorno's words, "atonality's primary impulse" (Q, 182), "organized chaos" (Q, 184), "free [musical] prose" (Q, 188).³³ Adorno also considers it to be organic rather than mechanical (Q, 307).³⁴ Such music may legitimately seek solutions to abandoned, unfinished artistic problems so long as "what

says something about the price that had to be paid for progress" (Q, 120).

³²Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 7.

³³This is not to say that informal music would lack order. "Only music which is in control of itself would be in control of its own freedom from every compulsion, even its own" (Q, 318).

³⁴Jameson sees informal music as involving "*ad hoc* problem-solving," rather than the systematic composition characteristic of serialism. The compositional rules of informal music, Jameson suggests, are occasional, "made up to be used only once" (*Late Marxism*, 247).

returns are problems, not unproblematic categories and solutions.’³⁵ For Jameson, informal music also includes an ‘effort to drop out of (musical) history,’³⁶ since musical history, in Adorno’s view, is responsible for tracing the unfolding historical dialectic of systematic composition, a dialectic that informal music seeks to escape or at least suspend.³⁷ This reaction against formal compositional systems, Jameson argues, makes the ‘concept of a ‘*musique informelle*’ ... exceedingly postmodern, in the way it includes a revolt against the irreversible necessities of modernist aesthetic time, change, and progress, along with its more predictable reactions against systems of Schoenberg’s type.’³⁸

In Adorno’s scheme, the crisis of musical composition that leads to *musique informelle*—a crisis in the musical mode of non-discursive knowledge—infiltrates discursive knowledge as well, since, for Adorno, art represents something like knowledge of what is possible but does not yet exist in society, while discursive knowledge can only address what actually exists. In non-discursive terms, art addresses social antagonisms buried deep within discursive modes of knowledge; philosophy needs art in order to articulate what philosophy on its own cannot say. Yet modern art needs philosophical discourse in order to make itself intelligible. Hence philosophy and art, Adorno’s paradigms for discursive and non-discursive forms of knowledge, respectively,

³⁵Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 54 (my translation). Indeed Adorno does not even consider a return to tonality to be out of the question for informal music.

³⁶Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 247.

³⁷As Jameson notes, ‘this relaxation of the logic of history ... is very consistent with one particular strand in Adorno’s thinking, which he sometimes staged as the very program of his own work: namely the stress ... on the repudiation of system and the commitment to the fragmentary and the occasional, to a freedom in the instant that eschewed the traditional German longing for the *Hauptwerk* and the architectonic truth’ (*Late Marxism*, 247).

³⁸*Ibid.*, 246-47.

turn out to require one another. Art can reveal the truth of the possible, but without philosophy that truth remains unintelligible.³⁹ Likewise, philosophy can reveal the falsity of the actual, but without art that falsity remains inarticulate or even nonsensical. The increasing unintelligibility of art itself—and in Adorno’s view music only represents the furthest extreme in this general movement—stands for something like the unintelligibility of what is possible but has not been achieved as opposed to what seems actual but is not really possible. As art grows more and more unintelligible, philosophy becomes ever more inarticulate.

The connection between art and philosophy comes together in understanding the separation between form and content, the tension that is the work’s import (*Gehalt*). Import, what is non-identical in the relationship between form and content, ultimately always eludes codification in language, however, and so calls into the question of the possibility of philosophical interpretation and even the right of art to exist.⁴⁰ “Vulgar as the distinction between form and content is in the face of a work of art, just as feeble is the abstract assertion of their identity.... In it the riddle of all art takes on, in Mahler, a form that torments the onlooker, the more insistently the better he understands it, with the question as to what art is and ought to accomplish” (M, 76). Problems of composition thus transmute into problems of interpretation, causing philosophy to reflect on the very possibility of interpretation. As Jameson notes, “interpretation as such—the reading of the particular in light of the absent universal—is dialectically transformed and ‘sublated’ [in Adorno’s work]: producing a new mode of interpretation in which the particular is read, not in light of the universal, but rather in light of the very contradiction between universal and particular [i.e., *Gehalt*] in the first place. Interpretation now means turning the text

³⁹As Zuidervaart notes, “artworks can only testify for the possibility of the possible; they cannot actualize this possibility.... Truth is why art needs philosophy” (*Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, 203).

⁴⁰Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

inside out and making it into a symptom of the very problem of interpretation itself.”⁴¹

Undoubtedly, this mode of interpretation – an analytical movement from part to absent whole – resembles and is perhaps even derived from the “new concept of [musical] analysis” that Adorno refers to in the preface to the *Alban Berg* book (B, xviii). In fact, Adorno addresses the issue of musical analysis on more than one occasion, most strikingly, perhaps, in a lecture entitled “On the Problem of Musical Analysis.”⁴² Among the books under review here, he takes up the issue specifically in a short essay from the Berg book called “Analysis and Berg” (B, 35-40). But many of the essays in *Quasi una Fantasia* and much of *Mahler* could be called loosely analytical; and aside from the two striking introductory chapters – “Tone” and “Reminiscence” – and the short essay on analysis, *Alban Berg* consists of nothing but analyses of Berg’s works.

In terms of musical analysis, Adorno does not start, as say Schenker does, with a conception of a pre-existent musical whole that has use for salient details only to the extent that those details support and elaborate the whole. Schenker’s method, for instance, is misguided in Adorno’s view because

his analyses end in universality, not in the specifics of an individual work. To say that the greatness of great art resides in such universality is a desperate apologia. Schenker considers the essence of a work of art to be those qualities that are general and unvarying, in keeping with his, musically speaking, reactionary attitude: with his idolization of tonality. (B, 37)⁴³

⁴¹Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 32.

⁴²Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Problem of Musical Analysis,” trans. Max Paddison, *Music Analysis* 1/2 (1982): 169-87.

⁴³Schenker’s method, however, is not without merit in Adorno’s view: “Schenker’s lasting achievement as an analyst is and remains the fact that he was the first to

Instead, Adorno typically begins with an idiosyncratic, but seemingly innocuous, surface detail (an unusual tempo marking or an odd piece of orchestration, for instance). He then proceeds to demonstrate how this detail feeds into the tension between part and whole, the import (*Gehalt*) of the work, so that the whole becomes, in a sense, explicable only through that characteristic detail.⁴⁴ Adorno's concept of analysis does not, however, dispense completely with the whole, nor indeed with traditional analytical categories, which have almost all of them been formulated in terms of the whole:

Though it is impossible, especially in traditional music, to disregard certain abstract, more or less invariant structural characteristics, whose meaning is in lively interaction with the fibre, no one has ever understood a work by simply reducing it to such abstract primary entities. Rather, it is more important to determine the changing values of those abstract characteristics within the constellation of each individual work; accordingly, as a result of such changes even abstract invariants take on radically different meanings. (B, 36)

The whole is analytically significant, even in tonal music, not as some abstract entity but only as a means by which that particular whole that is the integral artwork comes, by way of its characteristic details (of which that whole is itself one), to be formulated as a whole in the first place. In practice, then, Adorno always takes care to show how the whole arises from characteristic details rather than vice versa. Like the

demonstrate the constitutive importance of tonal relationships, as understood in the widest sense, for the concrete shape of a composition'' (Q, 281).

⁴⁴We may perhaps take Adorno's description of Berg's compositional practice as a guideline for Adorno's interpretive practice: "[Berg] elevates what was at one time incidental and conventional to fundamental significance and, through consistent use, transforms it into the means by which—with inexorable tenderness—convention is destroyed'' (B, 38).

question he attributes to Mahler's symphonies, Adorno analyses ask how the whole "can be reconstituted from the inside so that [it] is no longer violently imposed on the living specificities within it, but is at one with them" (Q, 99).

In Adorno's view, Mahler and Richard Strauss differ radically in the way that the detail, the whole, and the relationship between them are realized in their compositions. In fact, this difference lies at the heart of Adorno's vastly divergent responses to these two composers, who seem, on the surface, to share so much in common. Adorno admits, for instance, that Mahler adopts the compositional technique of deviation for largely the same reason that Strauss does: to deliver the "unforeseen" into music (Q, 95). But unlike Strauss, Mahler does not employ the resulting surprise only for its superficial, calculable effect (M, 67). Strauss's use of surprising and virtuosic deviations from the expected in order to produce the titillating illusion of transgressing aesthetic standards in fact conceals a deeper, secret complicity of his music with those standards.⁴⁵ In particular, his music requires an external standard to ensure that the effect of a deviation can be gauged with a relative degree of certainty.⁴⁶ Since only the reification of aesthetic norms can come close to guaranteeing the predictable effects upon which Strauss's music depends, his music must throw up barriers between the norm and the deviation so as to forestall the erosion of the latter into the former. Due to the necessity of this external standard, however, the deviations in his music, and so also the details, are never wholly themselves.⁴⁷ For this reason, the formal procedures that govern Strauss's work are also curiously impervious to the logic that the deviation, measured by its own standard, would seem to demand (M, 138). The characteristic detail, the deviation, turns out, once again, to

⁴⁵Theodor W. Adorno, "Richard Strauss: Born June 11, 1864 [Part I]," trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, *Perspectives of New Music* 4/1 (1965): 14.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 27-29.

⁴⁷Theodor W. Adorno, "Richard Strauss: Part II," trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, *Perspectives of New Music* 4/2 (1965): 120.

serve the totality in Strauss's music.⁴⁸

Adorno argues that Mahler's deviations, on the contrary, are those musical moments when the individual compositional impulse has not surrendered to the totality of the whole (M, 26). Deviations and ruptures allow Mahler to present what has been pushed to the margins of traditional music in favor of the whole—the unique, the characteristic, the particular. In Mahler's music, deviations are not consumed in the negation of the expected as they are in Strauss's music; rather Mahler extends deviation to the very foundations of his technique (M, 67). Mahler, Adorno says, seeks to reverse the relationship between whole and part so that the whole serves the particularity of the characteristic detail rather than vice versa (M, 19). In Mahler's music the logic of the deviation extends all the way to form (M, 83). Brokenness and disruptions of formal processes are the artistic qualities that emerge from following the logic of deviation to its extreme within a horizon of traditional aesthetics.

In terms of thematic process, the idea of deviation underlies variant technique. Variants, according to Adorno, "incorporate the principle derived from the oral tradition and the folksong, according to which subterfuges, minute variations [*Unterschiede*], are introduced into the repetition of the original melody that transforms the identical into the non-identical" (Q, 95). Although "each ... element [of a theme] is fixed in a recognizable shape" (Q, 95), variants never recur exactly the same. "The firm, identical core [of Mahler's themes], which nevertheless exists, is difficult to pin down, as if it shunned mensural notation. No theme is positively, unambiguously there, none is ever quite definitive" (M, 88). Instead what provides Mahler's themes with this "core" of identity occurs only in what does not actually appear. Variants "divest the theme of its identity; the fulfillment is the positive manifestation of what the theme has not yet become" (M, 88). Deployed as a variant, a theme testifies to the possibility of thematic reinterpretation. The "nuance," "lighting," even "character" of a theme may be altered, "so that the variants

⁴⁸Adorno, "Strauss, Part I," 26.

... finally take on tectonic functions” in the work (M, 87). This idea of radical thematic reinterpretation that lies behind the variant—the idea of a theme where no one thematic manifestation is given priority over any of the others—will eventually erode the traditional doctrine of architectonics, which requires the repetition or periodic recurrence of manifested thematic identity, and stimulate a new musical conception of form based on the “novel-like” principle of the variant, the recurrence of “always different [*immer ganz anderen*] yet identical [thematic] figures [*Gestalten*]” (M, 86). “It is in the tensions between the variations [*Varianten*] that the breathing rate of Mahler’s symphonies is established and the transition from the particular to the totality is achieved” (Q, 95). This new novel-like form does not abolish the architectonic principle but merely recognizes that “the tectonic element, primitively represented by repetition, cannot be extirpated [from music]” (M, 86). “Nominalist” in approach, novel-like form has “an aversion to knowing in advance how music continues” (M, 62). In novel-like form, “the movement of musical concepts begins from the bottom, as it were, with the facts of experience, transmitting them in the unity of their succession and finally striking from the whole the spark that leaps beyond the facts, instead of composing from above, from an ontology of forms” (M, 62).⁴⁹ Here in novel-like form we find the principle of the characteristic detail, the deviation, transformed into a formal one.⁵⁰

Having considered Mahler’s extension of deviation to the realm

⁴⁹Novel-like form is thus an incipient manifestation of the organizational principles of *musique informelle*, which Adorno likens to “large-scale musical prose” (Q, 190), to “an unconstrained musical nominalism, the rebellion against any general musical form, ... [that has become] conscious of its own limitations” (Q, 273). Furthermore, “the impulses and characteristic relations of such [informal] music do not presuppose any system laid down in advance or superimposed, not even a principle like the theme” (Q, 294).

⁵⁰Novel-like form carries implications for listening as well: “The listener must abandon himself to the flow of the work, from one chapter to the next, as with a story when you do not know how it is going to end. You then become aware of a second and superior logic. It follows from the definition of the individual figures, rather than an abstract, preordained design” (Q, 87).

of form, we are now in a position to see one of the reasons for Adorno's preference for Mahler over Strauss. Deviation in both composers' music serves as a denial of the expected, or in Adorno's terms the negation of aesthetic meaning. Only where deviations are realized in the actual artistic material however does the resulting brokenness attain a *meaningful* negation of musical meaning. Deviation cannot simply exist as effect—as it does in Strauss's music—and still remain meaningful. "In an authentic artwork," Zuidervaart writes, "the negation of meaning takes shape as a negative quality of the work itself ...; in a resigned artwork, the negation of meaning is merely replicated.... Everything depends on whether the negation has intrinsic meaning or whether it simply conforms to the status quo."⁵¹ Mahler's music is authentic because deviation appears in the musical material as a negative aesthetic quality of brokenness, a quality that extends even to the realm of form as novel-like ruptures in the temporal flow, while Strauss's music is resigned because deviation is harnessed and reproduced only for its effect, the affirmative aesthetic quality of surprise, without pushing the logic of deviation all the way to artistic form.

I would like to conclude by considering briefly more general assets that Adorno, and critical theory in general, might bring to music theory. What immediately strikes one about *Alban Berg*, for instance, are not so much the many fine, individual analyses that Adorno offers of the composer's works but the juxtaposition of Adorno's older articles with the more recent contributions. Certainly, the older articles, reprinted from Willi Reich's similarly titled, 1937 compilation *Alban Berg*,⁵² show a skilled practitioner of thematic and formal analysis. If nothing else, these essays should put to rest any lingering doubts about Adorno's analytical skills. Even so, the later essays, if less rigorously analytical, are richer than the earlier ones in almost every way except,

⁵¹Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 174.

⁵²Willi Reich, *Alban Berg. Mit Bergs eigenen Schriften und Beiträgen von Theodor Wieselgrund-Adorno und Ernst Krenek* (Vienna, Leipzig, and Zürich: Herbert Reichner Verlag, 1937).

perhaps, in the use of printed musical examples.⁵³

The more recent analyses in *Alban Berg* as well as the more analytical sections of *Quasi una Fantasia* and *Mahler* contain perhaps Adorno's greatest potential contribution to music theory. What these essays attempt to accomplish is a movement through analysis to the social dimension of the work. Adorno utilizes analysis to reveal the social mechanism operating in the very substance of the work. As Jameson writes, "all [Adorno's] aesthetic writings ... are a veritable organon of the rewriting or transcoding of formal [aesthetic] questions into substantive socioeconomic ones."⁵⁴ Yet it is important to realize that, unlike other scholars who focus on the social dimension of music—and this is where his real value lies—Adorno continues to insist on the necessity of analysis in order to uncover this social dimension of the artwork. Characteristically, Adorno writes in *Alban Berg*: "Distrust of analysis ... is not only allied with an uncritical, irrational view of art but also with a reactionary attitude in general" (B, 35). In fact, without analysis, the social dimension of the artwork remains, for Adorno, cryptic and indecipherable.

Even so, analysis has something of a contradictory status in Adorno's aesthetic system. On the one hand, by focusing narrowly on artistic technique, analysis enjoys an intimacy with the artistic object that no other mode of apprehending the artwork has been able to equal. "In truth, any interpreter who is musical and seriously committed to the subject at hand learns for himself that there is no other way faithfully to describe texture, economy, stratification, and coherence than through ... analysis" (B, 35). On the other hand, the intense concentration on a work that analysis demands often loses sight of the fact that understanding a work consists of more than just analyzing it. "Musically, even motivic and thematic analysis ... frequently suffers from the superstition that, by dividing a work up into its constituent

⁵³Incidentally, if we may judge by his preface, Adorno himself would evidently concur with this assessment of his early and late essays (B, xvii).

⁵⁴Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 239.

parts, it had already understood [that work].”⁵⁵ In extreme cases, analysis may even displace the work altogether. In such cases, analysis turns into a fetish, into a denial that music can extend beyond itself and penetrate the society that produced it and that music, in turn, helps shape. Analysis used this way, Adorno suggests, only serves to conceal the true significance of art by helping “stifle critical social thought about art.”⁵⁶ Yet those who use analysis in order to ignore the social dimension of art do not experience art any more than those who refuse to analyze it: “if the work of art is experienced in a purely aesthetic fashion, it is not even aesthetically appreciated in the first place.”⁵⁷ A true aesthetic appreciation of art involves an understanding of the work that moves through and beyond the narrow confines of analysis in order to place the work in a horizon of social experience, a horizon without which analysis itself would be impossible.

Has Adorno then placed analysis at the service of social critique? Does he not, in fact, make a muted call for a retreat *from* analysis, for a replacement of analysis *by* social critique and so an end to analysis?

To be sure, this does not mean . . . that *less* analysis is needed, but rather *more*, a second reflection. It is not enough to establish analytically the constituent elements, nor even the most concrete primary cells, the so-called “inspired ideas.” Above all it is necessary to reconstruct what happens to those ideas, or, to use Schoenberg’s phrase, to write the “history of a theme.” (B, 37)

A call for analytical reflection, for the writing of the history of a theme, and ultimately for narrative—here then is an agenda for a new mode of analysis, perhaps most fully realized in the Mahler book, that is neither identical with nor separable from social critique.

⁵⁵Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 477 (my translation).

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., 9 (translation Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 185).

The key term here is the silent one, namely narrative. Even a cursory glance at either *Mahler* or *Alban Berg* will confirm that Adorno, though never eschewing provocative metaphors, does not have in mind what usually passes for “narrative” musical analysis—the construction of “narrative” stories or programs that fit snugly with the unfolding of the events in the music. Certainly all analysis has something of such story-telling about it, however buried those traces may be, simply because analysis, like the telling of stories, is motivated by the desire to communicate human understanding.⁵⁸ But Adorno sees something else in narrative. In particular, literary narratives have recourse to a distance between the narrative discourse and what is narrated that allows them to embed within that discourse a reflection on the problems endemic to telling and the difficulties of ever achieving faithful interpretation. In other words, narratives are capable of self-reflection. Adorno wants to appropriate this insight for musical analysis. “It is just as urgent for musical theory to reflect on its own procedures as it is for music itself” (Q 272). Narratively self-reflective, analysis would begin to resemble the novel-like prose that he attributes to *musique informelle*. This informal analysis would not, however, know *a priori* how it would proceed, nor indeed that it would succeed. Like informal music, it would lack definite, pre-existent form. And how would we describe the shape of such informality? We have, it turns out, been staring at the answer all along: *Quasi una Fantasia*—like a fantasy.

⁵⁸Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 46.