

After Adorno

Theodor W. Adorno placed music at the centre of his critique of modernity and broached some of the most important questions about the role of music in contemporary society. One of his central arguments was that music, through the manner of its composition, affected consciousness and was a means of social management and control. His work was primarily theoretical, however, and because these issues were never explored empirically his work has become sidelined in current music sociology. This book argues that music sociology can be greatly enriched by a return to Adorno's concerns, in particular his focus on music as a dynamic medium of social life. Intended as a guide to 'how to do music sociology', this book deals with critical topics too often sidelined such as aesthetic ordering, cognition, the emotions and music as a management device, and reworks Adorno's focus through a series of grounded examples.

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After Adorno Rethinking Music Sociology

Tia DeNora



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In fond remembrance of the musical séances, Victoria Palace, Winter
1981

New music: new listening. Not an attempt to understand something
that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would
be given the shapes of words. Just an attention to the activity of sounds.

John Cage

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Preface: A two part invention

In the early 1980s, I attended a public lecture given by a prominent American sociologist now deceased. We were introduced and conversed briefly. He enquired politely about my academic aspirations and I described my interest in Adorno's socio-musical work. (My undergraduate thesis had been on the *Philosophy of Modern Music* (see DeNora 1986a) and I counted myself as one of Adorno's most ardent devotees.) To the best of my recollection, this sociologist said, 'and what will you do when you finish with Adorno, for finish with him you will?'

His words stung at the time. But, by the mid-1980s, in the second year of the Sociology Ph.D. programme at University of California, San Diego (UCSD) I had – or so I then assumed – 'finished' with Adorno. Tuning in to a curriculum that emphasised socio-linguistics, ethnomethodology, and action theory, and reading Becker's *Art Worlds* (then something of a watershed), I became less interested in what I began to see as 'impossible' questions about music's link to consciousness and domination. I began to work on the question of musical identity and value, viewed through the prism of reputation in-the-making. As a case-in-point I chose to focus on Beethoven and his musical world in late eighteenth-century Vienna. At that point, for me, Adorno came to seem not only remote but – worse – empirically suspect. His books and writings, and the various studies of his works by others over which I had pored during the late 1970s and early 1980s, were pushed further to the back of my bookshelf as I immersed myself in the history of musical institutions.

It has taken me over twenty years working as a music sociologist to return to Adorno. And I realise now that there is no need to have to choose between the role of acolyte or opponent. It is far more interesting to explore the interplay of 'theme' and 'counter theme', between Adorno's perspective and the perspectives of others on socio-musical subjects. It is with such 'invention' in mind, then, that this book addresses Adorno's work on music, with attention to the critique Adorno has received at the hands of current music sociology and cognate areas. I hope to illuminate a few of the places where, at the centenary of Adorno's birth

(11 September 2003), it is possible to build upon Adorno and in grounded ways. In wending my way through Adorno's musical oeuvre and its critique, I shall suggest that, in its inception, Adorno's socio-musical work is undoubtedly brilliant. I shall also suggest that we gain little by regarding it as a finished system. Indeed, in so far as Adorno's life's work was devoted to the critique of objectification, it seems only fitting that we do not attempt to canonise Adorno as a body of work incapable of change or adaptation. Let us instead consider his writings for insights that lend themselves to further development.

It has now been forty years since Adorno first published his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, and interest in his work has flourished. Despite the various criticisms that have been directed against Adorno's unique version of music sociology, there is no discounting its seriousness, no question that the questions he posed were profound. For this reason, Adorno remains a figure with whom to reckon.

In what follows, my aim is to connect Adorno with action-oriented, grounded music sociology. In that endeavour I hope also to provide a programme for doing music sociology (one that reflects my own views and approach within the field). In particular, my aim is to discuss the topics that formed the core of Adorno's agenda, in ways that make them amenable to empirical investigation. It is for this reason that I have called the book 'After Adorno' and I hope that readers will appreciate the double meaning here – both in homage to Adorno (for I believe that music sociology can be refreshed through renewed attention to Adorno's concern with musical structures, modes of listening, cognition, and 'control') and, simultaneously, moving beyond (to the side of?) his original methods and levels of theorising.

Chapter 1 offers a strategic summary of Adorno's socio-musical work, drawing out at the end key themes on which Adorno has been criticised by sociologists. In chapter 2, I review sociology of music and the new musicology and critique their respective conceptions of music (in sociology) and society (in musicology). From there, I describe a programme of grounded, actor-oriented research, focused on the concept of the Musical Event and suggest this programme establishes Adorno's concerns at the 'right' level of generality – at a level, that is, concerned with specifiable musical practices. Although this focus involves micro-level analysis, it lends itself, I argue, to traditionally macro-sociological concerns, illuminating these concerns at the level of action. Chapters 3 to 5 employ the programme outlined in chapter 2, to address Adornoian themes – music's relation to consciousness and cognition (chapter 3), subjectivity and emotions (chapter 4), and, drawing these themes together

in chapter 5, the idea of ordering and social control. I hope, at the end of chapter 6, to have made a case that music sociology, empirically conceived, can not only be compatible with Adorno's original concerns, but can actually further cultural theory by helping to identify the mechanisms of how culture (music) works in relation to human agency.

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Parts of chapter 2 draw on material developed in Eric Clarke and Nicholas Cook (eds.), *Empirical Musicology* (Oxford University Press, 2003). Parts of chapter 4 draw on material previously published in Patrik Juslin and John Sloboda (eds.), *Music and Emotion* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

A note on background reading

What follows is not an introduction to Adorno nor is it intended to catalogue all of the themes and topics covered in his socio-musical oeuvre. Such an exercise is superfluous: there are many excellent studies of Adorno to which readers may turn. These include Richard Leppert's recent study ((2002) – published as a commentary to thirty-odd essays by Adorno), and my friend and colleague at Exeter, Robert Witkin's books (1998; 2002). There are also the now classic texts by Susan Buck-Morss (1979) and Martin Jay (1984), and, within musicology, the exceptional essays by Rose Rosengard Subotnik (Subotnik 1991; 1996), whose work set the initial agenda of Adorno studies within musicology and dates back over more than two decades. Also highly useful is W. V. Blomster's essay on Adorno's music sociology, published in *Telos* (1976). For more overtly sociological critiques of Adorno, readers are referred in particular to extended treatments in work by Peter Martin (1995) and Richard Middleton (1990). And for a recent consideration of Adorno in relation to late twentieth-century music technology, there is Michael Bull's account of the practices of personal stereo use (2000), a work that shares many of the perspectives developed in my own work on music in everyday life (2000). All of these sources, in company with Adorno's own writings, can be read before or as companions to what follows here. (The most comprehensive bibliography of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources in English can be found in Leppert's recent work (Adorno 2002:681–708).)