

**Generative-Destructive Aesthetics as an Answer to
the “End of Art”
Some Reflections on Th.W.Adorno's Music Aesthetics**

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Abstract: The following essay tries to turn a thorough reading of Adorno's analyses and reflections on aesthetics - and on music aesthetics in particular - to good account for a sufficient understanding and aesthetically productive assimilation of the “end of art”-thesis. I have endeavored to show in part I that a thesis concerning the “end of art”, which in this context implies advancement modernism (*Fortschrittsmoderne*), is very conspicuous in Adorno's works, where advancement modernism is to be understood as modernism negating tradition (in an abstract sense), ousting especially the expressive music of the nineteenth century and insisting on permanent innovation. Using Adorno's interpretation of Mahler and Berg as a point of departure, I have demonstrated in part II that Adorno's work does feature a concept of modernism which incorporates the two fundamental postulates of postmodernism - integration of tradition and popular art -, simultaneously submitting them to severe criticism (part III). To conclude, availing myself of the concept “generative-destructive aesthetics” gained from a perusal of Adorno's works, I have ventured to provide evidence for the relevance of Adorno's approach to a productive understanding of the “end of art”-thesis today.

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At the very latest since Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics, the “end of art”-thesis has kept a firm grip on the discourse on aesthetics. In the wake of recent critical debate on “postmodernism” in criticism of art, culture and civilisation, the “end of art” thesis is now especially in vogue. Arthur Danto for example has successfully adopted the “end of art” thesis and demonstrated the vantage this concept offers for the aestheticphilosophical discussion of both classical modernism and contemporary art production. While Danto has thus contributed substantially to an adequate understanding of this art, it remains a surprising fact that Danto, even though his reflections are heavily indebted to Hegel, does not even mention the single most influential German aesthetic theorist of the twentieth century, Adorno, who himself devoted more than marginal attention to the “end of art”.

Why this is so is not within the scope of my knowledge. In any case it is regrettable, since Adorno not only makes reference to Hegel's so called “end of art” thesis, but has also, pro and contra Hegel, studied this thesis in a manner which has yielded valuable results and opened up new aspects of it.¹ And, in the bargain, he has tried to come up with an answer to this “end of art”. His answer - if one were to continue his line of thought and venture a somewhat pointed expression - runs as follows: “generative-destructive aesthetics”. I will explicate this in the course of the paper.

I. The End of “Advancement Modernism”

To begin, in the domain of music aesthetics the term “advancement modernism” implies criticism of “serialism”, which “extinguishes the still remaining residues of the conventional and the negated” (7, 223).² It also implies criticism of the dodecaphonic method of composition.

1. Innovation-Fetishism and Exclusion of the Worn-out

A constraint results from the developmental tendency in occidental culture, a tendency referred to as “aesthetic nominalism”, which places special emphasis on subjectivity and outlaws the import of any form-in-itself (an sich seiende Form). This very constraint is a fundamental attack on tradition in general, condemns tradition as “heteronome”, and is intent on destroying everything conventional and not self-set. Introducing the “new” into art, this intention is realized. It incorporates the autonomous new in order to dispose of the heteronome traditional. Once the traditional is dismissed, the new becomes itself traditional: Art is overcome by a mania of destruction and renewal, the fury of disappearance mates with the fetishism for the new (cf. 7, 41) controlled by the laws of the market: “The new is not a subjective category but results necessarily from the actual circumstances. It knows no other alternative to realize itself and free itself of heteronomy.” (7, 40)

Advanced art (avancierte Kunst) is “antithetically related to tradition” (7, 508), a relation which results in a “canon of prohibitions” (12, 40; 7, 60/456). In brief, there is a “rupture” (7, 517) between modern conscience and the aesthetic tradition.

Of course, one might see nothing wrong with this: That which art negates on the one hand - tradition - is, on the other hand, not only compensated by an avant-garde conquest of new domains, but also by a considerable extension of its possibilities. It is this very process, one might claim, which continuously rejuvenates art, enabling it thus to stay alive.

But according to Adorno this view is generated only by thinking “from without” (7, 223). Because from an external point of view “the possible extension of available material is apt to be highly overestimated. Artists offset the refusal (*die Refus*) rendered inevitable not only by taste but by the state of the material itself” (7, 223). In this way, the avant-garde creed establishes the dissonance as a veritable means of expression, yet banning the “worn-out” consonant-tonal material.

2. The Lethal Potential of Shrinking Means of Articulation

The “exclusion of worn-out and superseded procedures” (7, 58) shows a reductionism which, as long as it can continue to break new ground, does not affect the vital nerve of art. But the territory to be discovered does not extend into infinity. The process of discovery reaches an “end”. To discover new territory means: to push forward the evolution of the “material”, i.e. that substance with which the artist works. And once the “potential of innovation is exhausted”, says Adorno, innovations are mechanically sought after in a direction which tends to repeat them. Therefore, “the direction (Richtungstendenz) of innovation must be changed, transferred to a new plane” (7, 41). This is easily said. And is in general probably, admittedly, congruent and reasonable. But what are the actual consequences of such a

proposition?

What is to be understood by a change of direction following the "exhaustion" Adorno has shown in his analysis of "music on music" (from Mozart to Stravinsky): The composition of "music on music" results from narrowly drawn borderlines of the "possibility of 'invention'" within the scheme of tonality. It is, says Adorno, conditioned by a "shortage of the available", by "the depletion" of the "scarce material" in such a way that no idea which had not already appeared at an earlier stage could have thrived any longer. Hence, due to the "objective wear and tear of the stock-in-trade", the "quotation" as an explicitly subjective relationship with what is familiar, hence "music on music". But as far as the state of depletion is concerned, this only entails postponement, not removal. The latter was realized only through a radical renewal of the musical material: the emancipation of dissonance. To go ahead "out into the open ..., away from threadbare material", became possible only through Schönberg's technique: leaving behind the harmonic and melodic circle and turning to atonality (cf. 12, 167). In doing so, Schönberg repelled "the emaciated tonal material which had been used up in all its potentialities" (18, 118).

But what if this direction has also been tried and no new direction may be taken? What if the material may not be expanded any further? What if, in the year 1961, one realizes that "the pure evolution of material has reached an insuperable threshold value" (16, 425)? What if modernism, fixated on the pure evolution of material, has "reached its zenith" and "no discovery, no mere practise can find legitimacy in its novelty alone", since "all such discoveries fall within a space already delimited by the ear" (18, 241)?

In the context of the "aging of modern music" Adorno himself expressly states "that the expansion of the musical material itself has progressed to the furthest point possible" (Diss 147). The possibility of new sounds is said to be "virtually exhausted". It goes without saying that not all possible combinations of sounds have been tried. There is, after all, an infinite number of mathematical possibilities. The point, Adorno continues, is not quantity but quality. And within this realm "the planes are staked off and no sound, if it were to be added, would change the general impression of the acoustic scenery in its entirety" (Diss 147).

Adorno's reasoning is plausible and more than just idle conjecture: "Perhaps such change was itself only possible in view of still valid limitations" (Diss 147). Once, along with the emancipation of the dissonance, all harmonic taboos have lost their restrictive force, it seems as if "we have reached the absolute limit of the tonal space handed down through history in occidental music" (Diss 147).

This stage in the historical evolution is noxious to the avant-garde claim, to the shock-inducing quality of advanced composition (*avancierter Komposition*): avant-garde and shock turn "comical". The shocking effect "is blunted" (12, 186) - and not only in Stravinsky's case. This increasing bluntness hangs in general over the "aging of modern music". And modern music faces the threat of becoming incorporated into the "culture industry" (cf. Diss 136). "The concept of avant-garde, which has been reserved for decades for that direction declaring itself to be the most advanced, ... has ... acquired something of the pathetic ludicrousness of aged youth" (7, 44). "The systematized avant-garde, divided into schools and their respective leaders, has become no less resigned than the conformist, writing just to please the listeners' ears" (18, 176).³

According to Adorno, this situation includes a lethal factor: "It reveals ... the deadly potential of the

shrinking of means of articulation" (7, 449). For commensurate with "impoverishment of means ... poem, painting and music impoverish" (7, 66). The "canon of prohibitions ... tends to drain ... more and more" (OL 33), "anti-traditionalist energy turns into an all-devouring maelstrom" (7, 41) which finally sucks art itself down into the depth. In an age when art turns silent, art manifests "the impossibility of artistic objectivation" (7, 51). With this dwindling of means, music has reached the abstract void of serial composition, for which music itself is but a machine, bare of any emotion, running on inexorably.

This development, according to Adorno, also casts a "shadow" on the "heroic times", the origins of modern music itself (cf. Diss 145). And it was a shadow that Adorno perceived primarily in the music of Schönberg. To be sure, seen from the heights of the serial acme it is Schönberg who appears to have, "in the midst of the dodecimal method, preserved musical sense, the actual spirit of composition" (Diss 143). But already in "Philosophy of Modern Music", all the dangers serial composers - lacking heart and tradition - are likely to encounter, are listed. For all of the following: the "total rationalization of the material" (12, 170), the attempt to "seek refuge in advancement towards order" (12, 108), "placement of everything at one's disposal" (12, 71), the "virtual obliteration" of the subject (12, 70), the "questioning of the possibility of expression" (12, 27), the "threat of a specifically musical meaninglessness" (12, 83), the "steely apparatus" (12, 100), the "meaningless integration" (12, 195) and "heteronomy" (12, 195) - all of these Adorno attributes to the developmental stage of the Second Vienna School.

II. Adorno's Deviating Concept of Modernity in the Interpretation of Mahler and Berg

Without too much difficulty one might demonstrate - and of course this has already been done - that Adorno himself appears as a representative of advancement modernism with its accompanying negation of tradition. And yet this concept of modernism and tradition seems to deviate remarkably from other references to tradition, as articulated, for instance, in the following phrase from the interpretation of Mahler: "From time to time the most advanced (*das Fortgeschrittenste*) in art takes refuge in the backlog of the past it drags along, in the backlog it receives as a task yet to be brought to a close. Art reaches beyond the sphere of the up-to-date by picking up and rethinking what has been left along the wayside" (16, 339 cont.). Even if this "refuge" is said to be only "occasionally" necessary, still the reader and interpreter will want to pay close attention: obviously, Adorno's concept of modernism and of advancement *in aestheticis* is not so one-track and simplistic. Adorno is not a naive modernist, but a critic of that "entirely consistent" (Diss 149) position of modernism. And what is more, Adorno, unlike those who accused him of modernism,⁴ has diagnosed the overstraining of the avant-garde approach, the "imperturbable faith in linear progress" (Diss 137) as a downright deadly factor in art.⁵

Especially in his interpretation of Mahler and Berg,⁶ Adorno develops a concept of modernism which is different from one of "progress in the mastery of the material" (19, 628), where tradition is understood merely as a "canon of the prohibited". Adorno turns explicitly against a "somewhat narrow-minded understanding of modernism", against an understanding which "confuses the paint with the painting (*peinture*)" (16, 415; see also 16, 367).

1. Close Links with Material handed down by Tradition

No later than 1938, in his essay entitled "On the Fetish- Character in Music and the Regression of Listening", Adorno develops a concept of innovation which is directly opposed to that of advancement of material. Adorno emphasizes that Mahler is "progressive not by means of active innovation and advanced material", that he does "not follow a linear historical track at all" (13, 167). Adorno even goes so far as to talk about "customary vocabulary" (16, 327) and of a certain "harmlessness of the material" (13,167). Mahler, says Adorno, in comparison with Reger, Strauss and Debussy, is a "conservative" in respect to melody and color - and yet his music is "eminently modern" (13, 210), not surrogating a *meaningful structure* in its entirety. Mahler links himself to "traditionally inherited material" (13, 166), to the "victims of advancement", those "elements of language which are ruled out in the process of rationalization and command of the material" (13, 166). His characters are drawn from the "repertoire of traditional music" (13, 197). Here, a treatment of the subject of tradition announces itself, which is further continued in the interpretation of Berg.

Interpreting both composers, Adorno rejects the "cliché of the 'late romanticists'" (13, 152; 16, 417). But their romanticism is not fundamentally contested. On the contrary: Adorno continuously stresses the fact that both composers belong to the romantic tradition of Schubert, Schumann and Wagner. Still, he shows that this characterization fails to encompass the essential. This essential pith, the actuality, the newness, the authenticity and the positively "modern" character of the compositions does not, to be sure, strike one at first glance. It does not reveal itself to the superficial ear and to traditional analysis. Already in the case of Mahler, whose music Adorno characterizes as "anachronistically modern" (13, 256) and "latent modernism" (13, 278), this essence needs to be learned by the listener and unearthed by the interpreting aesthetic theorist/musicologist expressly for that particular purpose. But even more so in Berg's case: his is "true modernism" (13, 374) - a phrase meaning something quite distinct from mere "advancement in the material", wherein Schönberg and Webern were definitely more progressive.

In order to characterize this position of Mahler's and Berg's, Adorno also makes use of the concept "quotation" (cf. e.g. 13, 206/349/418/455/459 cont.; 18/641), in other words an "approximation" to quotation (16, 213). The quoted material may very well be submitted to ironic reshaping. For Adorno, musical terms such as *largo*, *adagio*, *andante* etc., which he concedes appropriate for Berg's "Chamber Concerto", are "legitimate only where they are not played in a romantic misconception of their reality, but where these types are, as it were, consciously being played with, transparently, topically, and, as it were, without claiming their reality" (17, 310).

Nevertheless, Adorno's approach to an ironic reshaping of the traditional is very differentiated: One can talk neither of a categorical rejection of irony, nor of aesthetic legitimation of an affirmative ironic gesture. Adorno is careful, for irony, which he detects above all in Stravinsky's works (and as it may indeed be observed in postmodern artists and aesthetic theorists), exhibits a tendency to "ridicule the lost world of imagery still conjured up" (13, 188). According to Adorno this attitude is completely alien to Mahler. He would much rather strive to "save" the "debris of the musical object-world", the fragments and scattered bits of memory (13, 189).⁷

2. The Integration of Popular Art

The sort of problems that go with a dichotomization of art into a serious-advanced and an entertaining-backward branch are well-known to Adorno. He has diagnosed the social isolation of avant-garde art as the "fatal danger of its own success" (12, 24). Modern music "must needs endeavor to reach humankind". Even in its most hermetical form, music is said to be social, "threatened by irrelevance as soon as all connecting ties with the listener are severed" (17, 291). For Adorno, the gap between the so called low and high art is nefarious and ought to be bridged. He does not intend to promulgate a law of "clear-cut dichotomy of high and low music" - it is the "administration of music culture" (16, 374) that does so.

There are many passages in Adorno's work on music aesthetics where he accepts music which attempts a reconciliation of the two diverging branches (serious vs. entertaining) and calls for the integration of folk, popular, even banal and vulgar-musical elements. Alongside Adorno's interpretations of Schreker and Zemlinsky,⁸ it is especially in the interpretations of Berg and Mahler that a program can be found which suggests closing the gap between serious and entertaining music. In the case of Berg's "Weinaria" for instance, a more convincing motto than that which appears in the following passage of Hofmannsthal's "Buch der Freude" would be inconceivable: "Claudel on Baudelaire's style: C'est un extraordinaire mélange du style racinien et du style journaliste de son temps" (13, 463). In the aria we find elements of "allegorical dejection" and "trivial and trifling recklessness", interwoven with that "genie in the bottle" and the "musical merchandise of the tango", the "cry of lonesome souls" and the "alienated sociability of piano and saxophone in Jazz, or the elevator-music of parlor orchestras" (13, 463).

Mahler's symphonies "are a shameless parade of well-known tunes, of melodic vestiges of highly acclaimed music, insipid folk ditties, popular hit-songs and crooner's tunes" (13, 184). But these elements from the sphere of serious music are not present just for the purpose of contrast. "Oftentimes the power of names is far better preserved in the realm of kitsch and vulgar music than in that of serious music, which sacrificed all that to the principle of stilization, even prior to the age of radical construction." (13, 185)

Already in 1929, in his "Nachtmusik" dedicated "to the revered Alban Berg" Adorno stated: "Now that the solemn loneliness of nineteenth-century serious music is itself questionable, light music usurps high music which is on the decline - I daresay in part because the former preserves some residue of those grand contents which the latter apostrophizes in vain." (17, 53)

Adorno's interpretations of Mahler and Berg reiterate emphatically the function, constitutive for their music, of the "banal" (e.g. 13, 417/208), of "vulgar music" (e.g. 13, 184 cont./200/434), of "decayed music" (13, 477), of "popular music" (13, 180; 20.2, 802), of "folk" (20.2, 802; 13, 419/467; 18, 477), of the "potpourri" (13, 183 cont.), of "light music" (13, 465), of "elevated music for entertainment" (13, 482) and the "lower musical sphere" (13, 210), of "kitsch" (18, 501; 13, 186/189/467), of "parlor music" (13, 481), of "jazz" (15, 361; 13, 465-467), "tangos" (13, 466 cont.), and "chansons" (13, 481).

III. A Critique of Postmodernism

It should be sufficiently clear that Adorno, postulating close ties to tradition and to the integration of popular art, approaches the two elementary concerns of aesthetic "post-modernism" in general and of compository postmodernism in particular.⁹

Postserial, i.e. postmodern music since the nineteen seventies abounds with references to tradition. Even more so, these references seem to be its major constituent. As a representative example, one might quote Wolfgang Schreiber, who on the explanatory sheet accompanying cassette 10 of the series "Contemporary Music in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1970-1980" (*Zeitgenössische Musik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1970-1980*) published by the Deutscher Musikrat says: "At the very center, so to speak, of the concept of music in the seventies, we find a rekindled debate not only on musical tradition, but on history in general." (p. 8) The spectrum of traditionally oriented artists in the seventies ranges from Schnebel (significant are titles such as "Bearbeitung" ["arrangement"] and "Tradition" as well as the aesthetic reflection "Gestoppte Gärung" ["halted fermentation"]) to Kagel, Henze and Rihm.

Equally countless are postulates by composers and theorists of music aesthetics to close the gap between music and audience, between "serious" and "entertaining" music. Here too, there is a plea for an "escape from the ivory tower of the avant-garde"¹⁰.

That Adorno may not be labeled "postmodern" is because of his desire to put these - rather general - postulates more concretely and in a different way than did the postmodern expressionist composers, who had turned away from structuralist thinking of serialism, appealing to Mahler and Berg. Adorno becomes a critic of that particular shape postmodernism had acquired ever since the seventies.

1. Criticism of Affirmative and Ironic Use of Tradition

Thus Adorno is fundamentally critical of an approach which has no scruples about taking from tradition whatever happens to come in handy - which is usually quite a lot. Such a position tends to overlook the fact that the criterion for the success of a particular work is not the wealth of material. It is the very limitations of the material which force the artist to concentrate and be creatively productive. Adorno therefore calls this wealth a "false wealth" (OL 32) which results from a bourgeois spirit of ownership and exploitation. If the artist becomes entangled in this opulence, his production "descends to the level of arts and crafts; borrowing from the educated what is alien to his own estate the artist creates empty forms which can not be filled: for no authentic art has ever filled in forms" (OL 33).

In order to escape accusations that, motivated by a desire for security, postmodernism has sought refuge in the past, it has come up with a new mode of operation: The forms received by tradition are not maintained substantially; neither "style copy" nor "simple quotation" are offered. These forms are rather ironically undermined, are played with and are no longer granted an ontological dignity. In short, many postmodernists want anything but "the positive return of that which decayed" (12, 10); they do not want an "unchallenged acceptance of authority" (12, 168).

Adorno's position in reference to irony is, as has already been shown above (II.1), an utterly differentiated one. As a matter of principle, he calls for an extremely restricted use of irony. For irony's

elbowroom must not claim infinite space, irony must not be used for any arbitrary object, any arbitrary constellation. To do so, in a case where the dignity of the object and the constellation are missing, would render the use of irony “an unmotivated and cheap expedient”, and “unjustified” (18, 127).

For the postmodern condition irony is a “tempting artifice”. Yet one should not forget that taste still coincides “with the capability to renounce tempting artifices” (12, 142). Tradition may easily be “fooled” (12, 168), when “in the ironic game the impossibility of restoration” is recognized (12, 184). Anything may happen then, as long as whatever happens is no longer anything but its own “death mask”: “The ultimate perversion of style is universal necrophilia” (12, 185).

2. Criticism of Hasty Adaption to the Recipient's Preformed Modesty

The dangers inherent in the realization (and thus specification) of the postulate of closing the gap between serious-advanced and entertaining-backward art are by no means any less acute than those inherent in the postulate of traditionalism. And Adorno would not be Adorno had he not realized the dangers that accompany an unreflected and hasty leveling of differences.

The point here is not to talk about the psychic problems of subservience, or even of the submissive obedience to “vulgar” taste which many a postmodern artist and aesthetic theorist succumbs to. That is entirely their problem. Only the factual and technical aspect of the matter is pertinent here. And the problem - materially - is caused by the danger of allowing quality to suffer, or even of sacrificing it entirely, by making concessions to public “taste” - a taste which has not even been safely identified as truly identical with that of the public, and so might very well be nothing but the taste palmed off onto the public by manipulators and companies hankering after profit.

The agents of postmodernism simplyfy the matter whenever they seek to “adapt” to the majority, something which is possible only at the expense of quality - and much of that sort has already had to be put up with. Indeed, the “postmodern situation” works to overcome the isolation of advanced art. But equally crucial is that which Adorno declares to be the very aim of Mahler's symphonic work: “Mahler's work aims at moving the masses, who flee from the cultured music (*Kulturmusik*), without lowering the music to the level of the masses and adopting their standards” (13, 185).

If truth is an inherent aspect of art, if art does not exist solely for our pleasure, it would be foolish to sacrifice this aspect in favor of others. After all, noone would ever suggest that science and ethics should refrain from making revelations, if their results are not universally comprehensible. In an age when “entertainment” is of primary importance, when even in other fields such as politics and religion, entertainment plays a leading part, in times when art and aesthetics do not dominate but, on the contrary, “aesthetic hedonism” has become a sign of the times, one can not underestimate the importance of Adorno's warning about an erasure of differences, of a hastily decreed reunification of serious and light music, his warning about a music “which does the listening for the listener” (18, 801).

Lesley Fiedler's imperative: “Cross the Border - Close the Gap” is certainly identical to Adorno's postulate. But it may not be met by renouncing the moment of truth and lust in favor of blind mania and empty desire. The torn halves can not be rejoined simply by adding them back together.

The postulate of integrating popular art is not going to be realized by quoting popular motifs in an affirmative, unsophisticated way - and this also does not occur in the works of Mahler and Berg.

According to Adorno, the postulate is fulfilled not by increasing but only by making kitsch eloquent: the artist "ought to lend kitsch a tongue" (13, 189).

IV. Towards a Generative-Destructive Aesthetics: The Importance of Adorno Today, following Advancement Modernism and Postmodernism

Postmodernism saw in itself an answer to the end of modernism. And even if we are now celebrating the end of postmodernism,^{11/12} Adorno's answer to the end of modernism remains acutely relevant. One might safely maintain that especially due to the postmodern catastrophe a vacuum has developed which attracts Adorno's aesthetical conception and forces us to reread it, in the light of the postmodern experience which is now behind us. Especially Adorno's interpretation of Mahler and Berg must be reread, and the music of both listened to with "fresh" ears. Contemporary music, art and aesthetics would in that way receive fresh impulses and the thesis of the "end of art" would acquire new meaning.

If one thoroughly probes the interpretation of Mahler and Berg, that is to say Adorno's ideas about integrating tradition and popular art, it becomes obvious that Adorno, in writing his interpretation, not only departed from a simplicist one-track concept of modernism ("advancement in the material") but also from the fundamentals of occidental form-aesthetics in general, which aimed at *one* singular meaning - in order to reach a polyvalent, de-com-pository, generative-destructive aesthetics. To conclude my considerations, I should like to elaborate a little further on this point.

The interpretation Adorno uses in his approach to the music of Mahler and Berg is ultimately derived from the fundamental belief that no "meaningful whole", no "harmonic synthesis on a predetermined tonal basis" (13, 210) is to be found in this music and only "negative tonality" (18, 670) is detectable. Particularly the music of Berg, which for Adorno fulfills that which Mahler, due to the tonality of the material, could only hint at,¹³ consists of two fundamental elements: the tendency to resolve and to create distinctly differentiated forms. And it goes without saying that these two fundamental moments in Berg's music are not two distinctly separate "kinds" of music, but two elements of the same structure, conditioning each other reciprocally. The tendency of this music to resolve, the "call back into nothingness" (cf. 13, 328), attacks all distinct form, and yet depends on that very form in order to create the movement resulting in resolution, the motion towards "nothingness". Since music may not make form into something substantial or concrete, can not reify form at any time - in other words: since "transition" and "resolution" *have* always taken place - music is only able to present the definite form as if it were still evolving, unable - independent of the process of production - to maintain it as being-in-itself (*an sich seiende*): Berg's music, both the singular minor and the major forms, "springs ... from nothing" and "disappears ... into nothing" (13, 327). Berg's composing is "composition out of nothing into nothing" (18, 668).

This double tendency of creation - both generative and destructive at once - is a paradoxical problem" (15, 341), and is, when played live in concert, by no means to be resolved by the "hazy middle way" between the extremes of the chaotic and the clearly structured (15, 339). Berg's music, "polarized between two extremes" (13, 373), always performs a "double movement" (*ibid.*), a "tour de force", as Adorno never tires of stressing (cf. e.g. 18, 655 and 15, 347), an "acrobatic performance" (18, 655), a "quadrature of the circle" (13, 449). The obstacles placed in the way are "almost prohibitive"

(18, 655).

In order to articulate this “double movement” of Berg’s music, the “quadrature of the circle”, Adorno avails himself of the paradoxical phrase: It would be possible, especially when referring to Berg’s earlier works, to talk about “structured chaos” (16, 418). Berg, according to Adorno, is everywhere intent on “forming the formless as formless” (15, 340). His “anarchy” is to be understood as a “cipher of his rules” (13, 386). All of his work is intended to serve the “self-preservation of anarchy” (13, 353). “In Berg’s case, to create a form always means to combine, to place layer upon layer, to synthesize the incombinate and disparate by causing it to grow together into a single being: to dis-form.” (13, 353). No interpretation may simply “adequately reproduce” the forms (*Gestalten*) but must simultaneously show their relativity (cf. 15, 341).

The structure nothingness-being-nothingness (cf. e.g. 13, 327; 13, 355), or rather amorphous-articulate-amorphous (13, 404), is the basic structure of Berg’s music: overlapping levels, layers stacked on top of each other, an immense density which can not be compressed any further. In this context Adorno talks about the “inexhaustible quality,” about “a richness which, though overflowing, continuously regenerates itself” (16, 427; cf. also 18, 645), of an “inexhaustible qualitative fullness” (13, 348) - “minutely elaborated” (13, 428).

Hence, the work of a composition always offers “more” than the listener may actually and concomitantly perceive. This is to be understood both in a quantitative and in a qualitative sense: This is unlike conventional music, in which either one single or several forms are given to which the listener ought to pay attention. The listener rather has to construct the complex of forms out of music’s pervasive tendency towards resolution, and at the same time be aware of that tendency towards resolution. The listener must constantly switch back and forth between the “level” of resolution to that of forming. “The possibility to listen to and understand the whole piece from beginning to end” (*Durchhörbarkeit*) in the sense of perceiving and understanding integral shape-units is made impossible. Denial, imperceptibility is an essential trait of this music.

Adorno’s interpretation of Berg marks a radical change of direction in the history of the occidental understanding of musical works, their production and reception, a change in form-content-aesthetics, without thereby having to renounce the achievement of autonomous aesthetics, as in the case of John Cage. For music of this sort no longer operates with one single meaning content (*Sinngehalt*) which would only have to be actualized by the listener. This music no longer expects *one* organic comprehension of the work but operates with a polyvalent structure, from which the listener has to generate meaning - a kind of meaning which can not assert itself as the one and only meaning but is subject to a process of de-construction. Music of this kind is an infinite process of generation and destruction. The metaphysics of presence, as it dominates occidental aesthetics, is thus abandoned and the imperceptible, the an-aesthetic becomes a constitutive element of the aesthetic itself. Art committed to the aesthetics of presence (innovation modernism) comes to an end and art committed to generative-destructive aesthetics commences.

In this way the “end of art” - the end of a specific type of art - enables a different type of art and aesthetics to claim a new, hardly foreseeable domain. The task to survey this domain shall be left to those to come.

Index of Abbreviations

- DA M. Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt/Main,³ 1973. [Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming (New York, 1972)].
- Diss Theodor W. Adorno, *Dissonanzen. Musik in der verwalteten Welt*, (Göttingen⁶ 1982).
- OL Theodor W. Adorno, *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica*, (Frankfurt/Main⁵ 1973).

When quoting from *Gesammelte Schriften*, 23 vols., ed. R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main, 1970-86), the first number indicates the volume, the second the page.

Notes

- 1) On the relevance of Adorno's position for a sufficient discussion of the thesis of the "end of art," compare my study G. Seubold, *Das Ende der Kunst und der Paradigmenwechsel in der Ästhetik. Philosophische Untersuchungen zu Adorno, Heidegger und Gehlen in systematischer Absicht*, (Freiburg/München, 1997, 2. Aufl. 1998).
- 2) When quoting from *Gesammelte Schriften*, the first number refers to the volume, the second to the page. An index of abbreviations is to be found at the end of the text.
- 3) Consequently, "instead of the shock which vanishes together with the explosion" (15, 248), Adorno administers "advice on how to listen to new music" (15, 247).
- 4) Cf. e.g. P. Sloterdijk, *Kopernikanische Mobilmachung und ptolemäische Abrüstung*, (Frankfurt/Main, 1987), 25. Sloterdijk does not hesitate to openly brand Adorno as a "theorist of modernism", as someone who defends the "myth of modernism", the "modernist mythology". Differing radically from this assessment, P. Bürger calls Adorno's works a "radical critique of modernism, or to be more precise, of the concept of modernism". (cf. P. Bürger, "Das Altern der Moderne", in *Adorno-Konferenz*, ed. L. v. Friedeburg and J. Habermas (Frankfurt/Main, 1983), 177-197. The page referred to here is 185.)
- 5) Habermas' assertion that Adorno has espoused the spirit of modernism "so unreservedly" that "he already suspects an emotional reaction against the provocation of modernism in any attempt to distinguish between authentic modernity and mere modernism" (J. Habermas, "Die Moderne - ein unvollendetes Projekt", in *Wege aus der Moderne - Schlüsseltexte der Postmoderne-Diskussion*, ed. W. Welsch (Weinheim, 1988), 177-192, here: 177), betrays a lopsided and undifferentiated view. In the first place, because in addition to the excerpt from "Ästhetische Theorie" referred to by Habermas (presumably 7, 45 cont.), another passage ought to be quoted, where Adorno uses "modernity" in contrast with "modernist", adding a negative connotation to the latter term (Diss 146; cf. on the semantic differences of "modernism" and "modernity", which "do not constitute a *discrete* semantic opposition" [italics added by me]: 15, 145 cont.). In the 2nd place, Habermas argues on the too superficial assumption that Adorno works with a single meaning of the concept of modernism. This, obviously, must be declared illicit.
- 6) Adorno's sporadic remarks on Bartók or Janacek should also be mentioned. In the works of the two composers, "up to very recent times tonal material ... could still be used without incurring shame" (12, 41). Adorno's brief but exceedingly interesting interpretation of Schreker and Zemlinsky should not be overlooked.
- 7) The noticeable differences in Adorno's evaluation of irony become very clear when one compares his Picasso-interpretation with that of Stravinsky. Whereas in the case of Picasso irony denotes a "restriction of freedom", the "reduction of violence" inflicted on the reified object world, and the "reconciliation of subject and object" (18, 145 cont.), in Stravinsky's historicism ("the fetishization of cultural carcasses") irony is, in contrast, directed against the subject and is said to serve the corroboration of inherited conventional formulas, fostering the "triumph of rough, violent objectivity, in which the I crosses out itself" (18, 146).
- 8) Compare also Benjamin's letter dated march 18th, 1936, where the extremes of "highest" and "lowest," the autonomous work and the cinema, Schönberg and the American film, are said to be "the torn halves of the whole freedom" (see: W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften (Werkausgabe)*, ed. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser

- (Frankfurt/Main 19), vol. I.3, 1003). Adorno's praise of Kurt Weill is grounded in his belief that, among Weill's many other merits, "his blurring of the borderlines between serious and light music" (18, 802) was a remarkable feat. For Adorno there is no question that "the form of the musical may succeed in livening things up considerably, especially by introducing a number of wholesome caesuras into the overly schematized structure and direction of the new German musical drama" (18, 802).
- 9) The fact that Adorno's criticism of modernism has been largely ignored in discussions on postmodernism has been of great disadvantage for the discussion from the outset. It is not my task to trace the reasons for this neglect. But one of those reasons might very well be this: Even though Adorno developed his critique genuinely and fundamentally in his music aesthetics, postmodern philosophers continue in the vein already characteristic of the early traditional aesthetic theorists: in general, unfair and neglected treatment of music in comparison with the visual arts - the predominance of the eye and the disregard of the ear in particular. Lyotard's statement ("I can see nothing wrong with leaving this (i.e. music) to smarter people") acquires an almost symbolical meaning for the debate on postmodernism. (*Essays zu einer affirmativen Ästhetik*, (Berlin, 1982), 100).
 - 10) G. Eberle, "Zurück zum Dreiklang? Neue Trends in der Gegenwartsmusik", Rias Berlin, 02/21/1977, quoted in H.-W. Heister, "Sackgasse oder Ausweg aus dem Elfenbeinturm? Zur musikalischen Sprache in Wolfgang Rihms Jakob Lenz", in *Zur "Neuen Einfachheit" in der Musik*, ed. O. Kolleritsch (Vienna/Graz 1981), 106-125, here: 107.
 - 11) So the "post"-modernism of the nineteen seventies, eighties and nineties was not that new after all. See for instance Eberhardt Klemm's choice of a title: "Nichts Neues unter der Sonne: Postmoderne" ["Nothing New under the Sun: Postmodernism"]. (in *Musik und Gesellschaft* 37 (1987), 400-403. Cf. also H. Krones, "Warum gibt es in Österreich immer schon eine/keine Postmoderne?", in *Das Projekt Moderne und die Postmoderne*, ed. W. Gruhn (Regensburg, 1989), 211-246), and H. de la Motte-Habers' thesis that "today's postmodernism" can already look back on a "tradition" ("Merkmale postmoderner Musik"; in *Das Projekt Moderne und die Postmoderne*, ed. W. Gruhn (Regensburg, 1989), 53-67. See also H. Danuser, who states: "... that postmodernism, understood as non-modernism, had been present in the twentieth century before it could succeed in the past two decades - as it already had done in the nineteen thirties and forties - to function as a lasting disturbance of the positions of aesthetic modernism". ("Zur Kritik der musikalischen Postmoderne", in Gruhn, *Das Projekt ...*, 69-83, here: 72 cont.).
 - 12) Compare for instance *Nach der Postmoderne*, ed. A. Steffens (Düsseldorf/Bensheim, 1992); *The End of Postmodernism: New Directions; Proceedings of the First Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies*, ed. H. Ziegler (Stuttgart, 1993); I.P. Smirnov, *Sein und Kreativität oder Das Ende der Postmoderne*, (Ostfildern, 1997).
 - 13) Adorno's interpretation of Berg may be regarded in this respect as a pointed continuation of the argument in his Mahler interpretation. Berg assumes Mahler's formal creed and Mahler's - as one might choose to call it - "late romantic" tone, in order to complete it and bring it to perfection. Berg is capable of doing so because he is no longer bound to the "conditions of tonality which prevent complete realisation" (16, 624). In an other, even more decisive respect, the Berg interpretation marks a revolution in listening and interpretation in general: forced by Berg's complex structures, the "technique of placing layers of structures on top of each other", Adorno has to analyze the relations between the perceptible and the imperceptible, between granting and depriving - and is thus compelled to depart from the occidental aesthetics of form and content. Using Berg's compositions as a point of reference - although this does not reveal itself instantly to the hasty reader, but becomes evident only in a patient perusal of his analyses - Adorno develops a structure of music, which deserves to be considered the legacy of his aesthetic music theory. The fact that this legacy has hitherto not been taken into account might well be called a scandal.