

Current of Music

Theodor W.
Adorno

Current of Music

CURRENT OF MUSIC

Elements of a Radio Theory

Edited with an Introduction by
Robert Hullot-Kentor

polity

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Editor's Introduction

Second Salvage: Prolegomenon to a Reconstruction of *Current of Music*

Another way to say the search for reality
is to say the desire for completion.
Clifford Odets

The centenary proceedings in celebration of T. W. Adorno's birth in 2003 were a lugubrious display internationally, but most of all in Germany. There the event was headed up by a harness of three heavily shod biographies trudging in decade-long synchronization toward the publishing occasion, as if the goal were to make sure that no detail of Adorno's life went untrampled. Even Adorno's writing table and chair, in simulacra, were dragged into the Frankfurt ceremonies. Encased in a silicone cube, these mundane furnishings were established as a national treasure to be visited on *Adornoplatz* in hometown perpetuum. Suhrkamp Publishers and the Goethe Institute, working closely with a restaffed and now corporate-minded Adorno Archiv, distributed so absolute a mass of memento, chronology, and photograph – the known antipodes to Adorno's philosophy itself – that even under scrutiny it was often hard to decide whether the topic was the writing of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or the framing of the *Magna Carta*. The jubilee successfully portrayed the life of the man as if in a single stride he stepped from crib to garlanded tomb, where the philosophy itself was put to rest. The biographical preoccupation, undermining the

philosophy, finally undermined the biographical as well. Thus, one result of these centenary achievements is that now every next mention of Adorno's life only helps steal away from the dictum that 'Life does not live' any sense that the apprehension ever troubled the person who made the dictum the frontispiece to *Minima Moralia*.

This bears directly on the intention of this essay to provide a first introduction to *Current of Music*. For, as is to be explained, Adorno left the manuscripts for this work in fragmentary condition; what is conceptually valuable in them now depends in part on reconstruction. An assumption of this reconstruction has been that, when a work is abandoned in fragments, reference to the life that left them behind can legitimately provide transitions to potentiate tensions of thought that, deprived of their final shaping efforts, would otherwise dissipate. Certainly this assumption might have been more naively pursued prior to the centenary year. The only alternative now – for this introduction in any case – is to look the situation in the face and acknowledge that what is biographical in the transitions established here to provision *Current of Music* with a degree of tensed coherence has recently been woven into something milled out by the mile, with no end in sight. Perhaps in this recognition, what is now lifeless, with the feel of having never lived, will at least half speak of this situation rather than further compound the recently achieved inertness.

New York City, 1938–1941

In 1937, T. W. Adorno had been living in England for three years, having fled National Socialism. Although he was formerly a *Privatdozent* – an independent lecturer – in philosophy at the University of Frankfurt, the Nazis had deprived him of the right to teach, and the hardship of immigration had set him back to the status of a student at work on a dissertation, a critique of Husserlian phenomenology. He was obliged to hope that a DPhil, taken at Oxford, in addition to his PhD, would provide the over qualification that an immigrant would minimally need to secure a position at a British university.¹ In October, however, a telegram from Max Horkheimer caused him to revise these plans. Horkheimer had for some time wanted to bring Adorno to New York City, and the telegram proposed the means if Adorno were interested in participating in the Princeton Radio Research Project, a study supported by a Rockefeller Foundation grant under the direction of the sociologist and Austrian émigré Paul Lazarsfeld.² The next day Adorno wired back his readiness to accept the position, but the decision was hardly made without ambivalence.³ On one hand, Adorno saw that catastrophe was inevitable in Europe; he had no real

expectation of securing academic employment in prewar England; and his wife, Gretel, who was ill, found the English climate hard to tolerate, and it was hoped she might recover in the United States. But now that his plans to depart had become reality and, 'contrary to all expectation', imminent, Adorno expressed in a letter of 27 November to Walter Benjamin what had all along weighed most against the decision. '*Uppermost*' – Adorno wrote – were his thoughts on Benjamin himself, and in this one word he lodged his distress as poignantly as possible between two men who after a decade of close involvement still addressed one another formally, as *Sie*. If Benjamin would realize, Adorno continued – emphasizing this *uppermost* of their friendship with a circumlocution of the greatest urgency for anyone as utterly familiar as was Benjamin with what Adorno held dearest – that *second* on his mind was that parting meant 'the real possibility of never seeing my mother again', Benjamin would be able to 'imagine how I feel about' the decision to leave.⁴ But, Adorno explained, he could not refuse Horkheimer's proposal. He had been assured that fully half his time would be devoted to the Institute for Social Research, then affiliated with Columbia University, and collaboration on projects that he and Horkheimer had long envisioned, most of all a study of dialectical materialism. By early January, Adorno had met in Paris with Lazarsfeld, and by late that month had submitted to him a lengthy memorandum outlining his research plans.⁵ On 26 February 1938, Adorno and his wife arrived on the steamship *Champlain* in New York City harbour. Adorno would remain in New York City until November 1941, when – without renewed funding for his position at the Princeton Radio Research Project – he would again be compelled to move in order to secure his proximity to Horkheimer, who had decided to go on to Los Angeles, where his own fragile health, and the institute's finances as well, could be better maintained. Adorno would not return to Germany until 1949, having spent almost one-quarter of his life as a refugee, a portion of that as an American citizen. He did not embrace German citizenship again until 1955.

Written in English

In his fifteen years as a refugee, T. W. Adorno wrote several major works, including *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Max Horkheimer, 1947), *Philosophy of New Music* (1949), and *Minima Moralia* (1951). Their dates of publication belie the years demanded by each of these seminal German texts that no doubt received Adorno's most decisive conceptual energies. Yet, in addition to these and numerous other projects, Adorno in the same period also produced a substantial body of

research written in English. The latter are distinctly secondary works from the perspective of the oeuvre as a whole but are nevertheless, in their own terms, of considerable interest. Among these writings in English are *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas's Radio Addresses* (1943) and *The Authoritarian Personality* (with Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, 1950). *Current of Music* was the working title that Adorno proposed on various occasions for a volume that would have assembled the majority of the research that he completed during his first four years in the United States while affiliated with Lazarsfeld in New York City. The texts conceived under this title – comprising several thousand pages – constitute far and away Adorno's most extensive work in English.

Yet Adorno did not succeed in his own lifetime in publishing this work whose topic and language were adopted under compulsion in the land to which its author fled. The study itself was rejected by a series of editors in the United States and was ultimately left incomplete among the many materials housed at the Adorno Archiv in Frankfurt. This essay intends to explain what Adorno meant to achieve in the book and why his efforts failed. It should be remarked at the outset, however, that this introduction in no way seeks pathos in defence of a work lost to history, as if deserving in reconstruction the rank of *texte maudit* or *Bürgerschreck*, for it is neither. If passages of *Current of Music* – both published and unpublished – did once antagonize and have the capacity to raise hackles again, it was not only ill will and happenstance that got in its way but just as much and more the work's own deficiencies. It is in full cognizance of the limits of these writings that *Current of Music* is now to be imagined into existence. This requires broad recognition and explanation of the complex situation in which this work in its many parts was written. In alliance with its own thinking, however, this reconstruction is certainly not undertaken here with the intention of setting the past back on its feet like a Golem conjured to walk the streets of another millennium, but rather by wanting to spark what is significant in that past when it is known self-consciously from the perspective of the present.

Music, electricity, and cultural hunger

The current of *Current of Music* is electricity. In the 1920s and still in the early 1930s, electricity had yet to be used on a vast scale for the reproduction of musical sound. The technology of radio transmission had been developed during World War I in the United States by a government that, in need of reliable means of communication with its European troops, seized by eminent domain the patents and work of

private inventors. Only in the following decades was this technology exploited for the literal capacity evident in Adorno's electrical metaphor – the current that powers radio – to produce music in streams and even floods of sound across any quantity of space simultaneously.⁶ The desire to receive this *current of music* produced the early momentum in radio sales: where only ten thousand families owned sets in 1922, 27 million families – out of 32 million in the United States – owned sets by 1939.⁷

If it is easily imagined that the introduction of radio music would motivate the rapid distribution of the device, it is not as easily guessed that a large proportion of the music heard in the United States on those radios was art music of the European classical tradition. Many stations broadcast live classical music exclusively: in 1921, for instance, the Chicago station KYW broadcast 'all performances of the Chicago Civic Opera, afternoon and evening, six days a week – and nothing else'.⁸ WQXR in New York City played classical music 80 per cent of the time and in the other 20 per cent talked primarily about it and the other arts. The more expensive radio sets were themselves advertised as having been built for distinguished music; they were fine 'instruments' that the listener faced as they 'played' and the listener was expected to be interested in its proper 'tuning'. No less a figure than Leopold Stokowski gave instruction for bringing the equipment up to pitch: 'In tuning-in on the wave length desired there is a central point of maximum clarity and truth of reception.'⁹ The skill of 'perfect tuning' was extolled as an optimal capacity, akin to perfect pitch. Radio stations that transmitted serious music portrayed themselves as conservatories: 'A visit to station WMAQ [in Chicago] is like entering a music conservatory. You enter a reception room . . . then on into the studio . . . artistically furnished in brown tones . . . here and there, a large fern . . . and a Mason and Hamlin grand piano.'¹⁰

This image of early radio devoted in significant proportion to European art music might prompt an enduringly fixed and real resentment in contemporary American readers, as if that was a moment when *high* still thought it could lord it over *low*. But in the early and genuinely class-conscious decades of American radio, when questions of the equitable redistribution of wealth and privilege were actually discussed – as they now are not – and an end was sought to much openly acknowledged resentment, the broadcast of European art music was a model of possible democratization. Contrary to what might be guessed at today, the distinction between *popular* and *classical* was loosely synonymous with what in those decades was discerned as the distinction between *light* – or *light popular* – and *serious* music. In the manuscripts of *Current of Music* Adorno himself regularly deals with these two sets

of categories as being easily interchangeable in the assumptions of the age. The significance of this is in what the now mostly forgotten pair *light* and *serious* music contributed to the synonymity. The distinction it drew indicates that the idea of amusement had not yet subordinated music entirely. Although the exclusivity of music as amusement was ascendant, a contrary seriousness of listening was commonly acknowledged as legitimate and valued. When *high* and *low* were invoked, the thinking involved was complex in a way that is now unfamiliar, since in the minds of many what was *high* was often valued as what ought to become the possession of all.

The evidence for this goes far beyond what can be derived from sets of terms. For the idea of culture itself had not yet suffered the catastrophic implication of World War II; culture was still thought to be a human privilege marked by, but no less distinguishable from, class privilege. When – for instance – Barnett Newman ran for mayor of New York in 1933, his manifesto was titled, ‘On the Need for Political Action by Men of Culture’. If his candidacy stood in minority and beleaguered opposition, he all the same had enough support to write confidently that ‘culture is the foundation of not only our present society, but of all our hopes for all future societies to come.’¹¹ This was characteristic of the expression of democratically minded individuals and institutions of various kinds and – in the ‘red decade’ – especially those many on the wide spectrum of the left who readily encouraged and fought for the broad distribution of art music. In Manhattan, for instance, the City Center for Music and Drama was established by the city government in alliance with trade union organizations to present symphony, ballet, and opera inexpensively to working-class audiences. The center was vigorously capable of supporting its own ballet and opera companies. In its own day, when the accomplishments of the City Center were discussed, its success was generally acknowledged not in terms of bringing *high* to *low* but in the fact that unlike the Metropolitan Opera, which was segregated, its opera house was not.¹²

Radio was acknowledged above all other institutions in this period as having the pre-eminent capacity to universalize performances of a human culture that was previously restricted to the wealthy. Its diffusion was civic policy. In 1937, New York’s mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, appeared on what was then the city’s proudly municipally owned radio station, WNYC – then under the directorship of the former head of the Socialist Worker’s League Morris Novik, whom La Guardia had appointed – to comment as a ‘music lover’ on Beethoven. The mayor provided ‘little stories about all the composers represented on the program and the music being played . . . He had the appearance of a man tackling an important job with great

earnestness.¹³ It only makes the same point to note here, with the mention of Morris Novik, that it was his office that two years later would engage Adorno in plans to present a lecture series as a citywide educational introduction to modern music on Sunday afternoons, the station's most listened-to hours. Although those plans were only partly realized, their existence is representative of a forward-looking orientation to radio and music that could not now be conceived on a major American radio station.

In these first decades of radio, those who had hopes for it expected it to wipe away the stigma of class privilege borne by art music, and this expectation met with success. As one commentator observed, 'Until the past few years such music was the rather expensive privilege of the inhabitants of a few large cities.'¹⁴ This observation was confirmed by statistics assembled in the late 1930s and reported in a 1938 article in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*: for though quantitatively all economic classes listened more to *light music* than to *serious music*, as a result of radio a majority of Americans, African American and white, came to like and listen to serious music. Four-fifths of the homes in the nation heard at least one symphonic or operatic broadcast a week.¹⁵ Even in rural areas, where radio most dramatically changed life but where interest in classical music was predictably less than in cities, there were stations such as WOI in Ames, Iowa – much studied by the Princeton Radio Research Project – that combined farm news and market reports with its most popular programme, *The Music Shop*, a daily broadcast of short symphonic pieces, chamber music, and music education.¹⁶ These broadcasts were especially directed to 'the farmer's wife', who, as Adorno mentions repeatedly in *Current of Music*, became a mythically invoked figure in discussions of radio's democratizing cultural potential. The invention of radio, it was said, would enable her to go about her household chores while attending Carnegie Hall and the Philharmonic gratis alongside the well heeled and mink clad. And in some regions of the country this mythical intention found reality. A characteristic letter from a female listener to WOI reads: 'The more I hear good music, such as you give us, the more I love it, and the more I hear that kind the more I dislike the other kind.'¹⁷ What rings of another age in this woman's comment is the apparently naive desire for self-improvement to be gained through familiarity with music held to be objectively superior. It is to be emphasized that she figures here as part of a movement. A now discredited idea of culture implicitly provided individuals such as herself with a critical stance toward their own perceptions and directed them with substantial expectation toward the promise of radio. Again, in the voice of *Harper's*: 'Millions are haunted by such

feelings of hunger for learning, for acquiring new arts, for self-improvement. And radio today makes an earnest effort to satisfy that hunger.¹⁸

Radio pedagogy

The *Harper's* statement vividly insists on the power of radio to nourish an age urgently beset by the need for educational self-improvement. And to rid this hunger, radio institutions of several kinds had been established, including 'schools of the air' to which Adorno occasionally refers throughout *Current of Music*. It was possible, for instance, to obtain a 'broad though simplified education in the arts and sciences . . . by sitting in front of your loudspeaker' at WNYC's *School for Listeners* or by following programmes at the University of the Air, broadcast by 'The Voice of Labor', the Eugene Debs memorial station WEVD. The latter presented complete classes in history, philosophy, labour, literature, and economics.¹⁹

But the single most significant pedagogical effort by radio in those decades, and in fact the most substantial pedagogical undertaking ever in the history of American broadcast media, the *NBC Music Appreciation Hour*, was a result of the success of radio in making European art music available nationally. It was a programme for the cultivation of musical knowledge and taste, and it is of specific interest here because in *Current of Music* Adorno devotes a lengthy essay to it and conceived the plan of his own educational broadcast in critical relation to it. For more than a decade, from 1928 to 1942, the programme was led by the conductor of the New York Symphony Philharmonic, Walter Damrosch. At its height it was heard weekly as required curriculum throughout the academic year in more than 70,000 schools nationwide, by more than 7 million students.²⁰ Educational materials coordinated with the nationally broadcast concert season in New York City were printed in the hundreds of thousands and distributed to classrooms in yearly editions; teachers received accompanying pedagogical instructions and test blanks to administer. Reviewing the pedagogical achievements of Damrosch's programme in the context of the reported demographics of national listening habits, even now it is easy to share spontaneously in the expectations widely sensed by many at the time that the interest in serious music produced by radio had led the masses of Americans to the verge of a cultural coming of age. In the words of *Harper's Monthly Magazine*: 'A sound and deep appreciation among the masses of our people is growing first in music and will draw after it, but more slowly, a love of the best in the other arts. . . . The American people, in the mass, are at the *threshold of a cultural maturity*.'²¹

Statistical inner ear: results

This passage was built out of the rhetoric of high hopes, certainly, but was founded, too, on developments in technology and an analysis of listenership in a major segment of American society. The reality it carried compellingly in its own moment heightens the acuity of the statistical riposte it receives in its encounter with how things today have in fact turned out: in 2003 there were 14,392 'formatted' radio stations in the United States – 50 per cent of which played the same songs – with 147 classical stations, 34 of them commercial.²² These statistics are not reported here as if they might reveal to anyone in North America or elsewhere what has occurred in American music. The world as a whole is in all things more familiar with the United States than the reverse, but its international presence has been foremost in the music it exports, up until very recently by means of radio as its primary vehicle of distribution. Any number of American songs named here might ineluctably provoke their playing in an inner ear that is worldwide. Since music is the most binding and involuntary form of neuro-cultural memory, every mind busy with this essay is obliged to acknowledge to itself that it is to some degree an artefact of what has transpired musically in the United States. If this seems provokingly self-evident, this is the feeling that the distinguished jazz historian, conductor, and composer Gunther Schuller touches on in his analysis of the situation of music as it had developed in the United States by the 1980s: 'We have here an essentially victimized American population whose freedom of choice in matters musical is virtually denied them.'²³

From Schuller's perspective and the available statistics, then, the expectations of 1938 expressed in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* would seem to have received a broadside from the historical development. But this is not the case, and, on second look, what that 1938 article presents turns out to have been more prescient than not as a harbinger of the situation Schuller portrays. For what carried the high hopes of 1938, the wave that can be felt coming up under its cultural anticipations, is perceptible as the statistical realities cited, themselves becoming statistics as reality. These depression-era statistics, in other words, not only reported a situation but increasingly became functional elements in the commercial manufacture of music; they participated in the elimination of music that owed its quality to having been made on another basis than in response to the needs and opportunities of industrial entertainment. Given the significance of the rise of radio market research for the history of music in the United States, therefore, it is of central importance for understanding the conflicts that would shape *Current of Music* to note that a pre-eminent institution for the development of market research in radio

in the 1930s and early 1940s was the Princeton Radio Research Project, whose statistics, as it happens, the *Harper's Monthly Magazine* article relied on.

Third-party listening and academic tycoon

Lazarsfeld himself initially provided the offices for the Princeton Radio Research Project in vacant factory space in Newark, New Jersey. The rundown, haphazard location was an implication of the fact that this was a privately held research venture that solicited contracts from public, commercial, and philanthropic sources. A brilliant statistician, single-mindedly pragmatic and by his own statement prepared to be ruthlessly so, Lazarsfeld developed a talent for transforming the practical problems of commerce and public interest into research projects undertaken in conjunction with university services, which he facilitated and supervised. His considerable significance in the history of sociology, beyond a group of skilfully conceived research projects, was for the invention in the late 1930s of an organizational structure that put the new science of sociology at the service of commercial interests. This innovation would complete his transformation from a young Austrian intellectual, passionately devoted as a Marxist activist to the implementation of 'a psychology of imminent revolution', to the author of a valuable study of unemployment, to a professor at Columbia University in Manhattan who in later life would be an academic tycoon.²⁴

If the Princeton Radio Research Project was situated at the turning point in Lazarsfeld's career, it was located at a significant moment as well in the history of the sociology of radio. Prior to its research there were few sources of information not only about the listenership of radio music but about all aspects of radio audition, including attention span, listening preferences and habits, general programme satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and local, regional, and national variables. According to the terms of its grant, under the title 'The Essential Value of Radio for All Types of Listeners', the Princeton Radio Research Project established itself as a major undertaking for the collection and analysis of radio audience information. It was to develop the tools for audience measurement along many parameters and demonstrate the usefulness of these measurements for the improvement of radio. By learning more about what audiences wanted and how radio succeeded or failed to provide for these needs, it would help make radio as valuable and useful to its listeners as possible. The philanthropic nature of this project would have been unmistakable in the decades when radio was not only looked to as a source of

education and cultural good but lived in the national imagination as the voice of social cohesion itself, as the one ready means of society-wide communication and vigilance. In the iconography of the age, radio's high, beaming towers radiated a masterful charisma and, especially during the war years, were as much beacons of safety as thought to be key targets for enemy plots. The broadcast industry itself, having won the privatization of the broadcast system and the right to advertise, in a series of much-disputed legislative struggles then still within living memory, was piously careful to emphasize radio's performance of social services and its contributions to national moral integrity.

This context certainly emphasized the philanthropic claim of a project to research 'The Essential Value of Radio for All Types of Listeners'. But if this title is held up to the light and examined a second time, it did once refract other potentials, and still does. It might well name an undertaking to assemble information about what listeners most valued in order to provide the data to some third party with heteronomous purposes for this 'essential value'. Once this is noticed, it is hard to decide what the title was about. It could, of course, have carried both meanings, as seems to be the case, but, if so, this ambiguity does not need to remain cloaked in lasting obscurity. An otherwise rarely acknowledged hermeneutical device, a dinner party, is available in historical documentation to solve the question. This particular supper, an award ceremony scheduled for the night of 15 February 1940, elucidates the definitive kinds of alliances at work at the Princeton Project: Frank Stanton, soon to be the president of Columbia Broadcasting System, wrote to John Marshall, the grant supervisor at the Rockefeller Foundation, to announce with pleasure that on that February evening Paul Lazarsfeld would be honoured by the advertising industry as the individual who had revealed 'the *educational significance* of radio programs'.²⁵ But what does this mean? Lazarsfeld might be credited with some contribution to education and radio, but not for discovering the educational value of radio, for which radio had long figured so broadly in the social imagination. On the contrary, Lazarsfeld had been chosen as advertising's man of the year in the area of research for having brought together people from commerce and academia and thus having succeeded at demonstrating the economic significance of radio's educational potential for advertisers. The award read: 'By integrating research efforts of individuals affiliated with both commercial and academic organizations, a significant beginning was made in 1939 to . . . interpret the social aspects of radio in terms of the economic pertinence to the commercial user of the medium.'²⁶ The dates are coincidental, but it represents

an actual convergence of realities that, within days of this announcement, further funding of Adorno's position at the Princeton Radio Research Project was denied by John Marshall at the Rockefeller Foundation, and Lazarsfeld himself learned that he had been hired as a professor of sociology at Columbia University.

Historical accuracy

Deference to historical accuracy has required that the end of Adorno's employment at the Princeton Radio Research Project be indicated prior to a word being said about his part in the project, for in every regard the alliance was over before it started. Initially, however, the collaboration did have certain plausibilities. Lazarsfeld shared with Adorno an interest in the development of the possibility for qualitative research and experimentation in sociological research. This collaborative concern resulted in the broad latitude of investigation granted Adorno when he was appointed the director of the Music Study division that, on the basis of its research, was to provide proposals for the qualitative improvement of the reception of broadcast music. This responsibility was among the foremost in urgency to any success of the entire Princeton project, since music comprised 50 per cent of broadcast time and, as already discussed, the programming of classical music in particular enjoyed indisputable national esteem. And here again, Lazarsfeld must have presumed Adorno's willing participation in this goal of the project. Given the moment's broad expectations for what radio broadcast of serious music might contribute to masses at the 'threshold of cultural maturity', Lazarsfeld would have assumed that, if anyone, Adorno would have affiliated himself energetically with the project's stated aims as part of the cultural movement of the democratic left in the United States in seeking ways to ameliorate broadcast reception. As a *Kulturphilosoph*, as a distinguished music critic, as a composer and a musician, Adorno combined a devotion to serious music with the capacity for the technical musical discernments to address what was then the central problem of the reception of broadcast music: the divergence between the audition of live musical performance and its reproduction on radio.²⁷

But if this approximates Lazarsfeld's estimation of Adorno's combined talents for the project, it was a complete misunderstanding. Adorno was not about to cast in his lot with a movement to spread musical culture. He carried no torch for culture, and least of all for musical culture. When he arrived in the United States what was fresh to his mind was the memory of a *Bildungsbürgertum* – the culture-prizing bourgeoisie – that was right at that moment to be found in the

streets of the 'homeland of culture' carrying real torches. This capitulation of German culture had not been any kind of surprise to him. On the contrary, German culture had failed to ward off the worst just because, as Adorno once wrote, it had long been the ally of the worst. Adorno had seen disaster coming in the deep perspectives of the opposition to bogus culture of all radical art since Romanticism. The music with which Adorno was fundamentally allied, the idiom of free atonality in which he composed, was the direct heir of that jagged radical tradition in which artists rejected once and for all any claim to being of a kind with their own audiences and, almost as summarily, to attributing to their work any pragmatic emancipatory social function even at the insistence of their own political allies. It is in these terms that the concerts of the Second Viennese School found their own legitimacy confirmed in the outrage, catcalls, and whistlings brought down on them by audiences sworn to higher things. Adorno's own account of trying to console Alban Berg after a concert premiere that had won direct, spontaneous public acclaim, of walking Berg through the streets of Berlin for much of an evening, may seem a charming tale of eccentricity until it is realized that, given what was on the horizon, Berg was right to be distraught – as he would be to this day. In the absence of a culture worthy of the name, culture for Adorno was what it was for Flaubert, namely, the power to resist it, and as such synonymous with art that is genuinely art.

Thus, in a catastrophic moment, the aims of the Princeton project could not have combined with the impulses of Adorno's own thought in a more tense, austere view of culture. There is no sense trying to imagine anyone less ready than Adorno to be enthused by cultural boosterism of any kind. In the United States, he perceived no masses prompted by a new familiarity with great music to the verge of cultural maturity and, if he had, he would have found it a specious achievement. The woman in Iowa who wrote to WOI with an enthusiastic tale of self-improvement in a quest for the better things would not have thrilled Adorno; he would have wanted to study the event more closely. For Adorno, music, when it is music, is a power to shatter rationalizing visions of transcendence and the normative order of life that these rationalizations support. *Music appreciation*, inculcated by radio, to him epitomized all that he opposed as instilling the opposite of a capacity for musical experience. It would present important music as an object of worshipful illusions, rather than as the quintessence of a capacity to make ruins of illusion. Thus, alongside his later essays addressed to Stravinsky and Heidegger, his study of Walter Damrosch's *NBC Music Appreciation Hour* (chapter 4 in this volume) is the most sustained, vituperative attack in the whole of his oeuvre and, like those

other essays, perhaps hobbled by the intensity of the siege. And just as Adorno could not in any way value the largest effort of musical education in the history of the United States as a value of radio, Lazarsfeld had probably selected the person least likely to be of any plausible use to him in completing a study on improving radio reception. And indeed, in the letter that he would eventually write Adorno to bring his participation in the project to a close, Lazarsfeld would accuse him of having given him what 'is definitely a black eye for me'.²⁸ Just months into their association, Lazarsfeld already sensed his faux pas and that Adorno was a danger to the project. In December 1938, Lazarsfeld wrote Frank Stanton, to begin to register formally his disassociation from Adorno: 'I have to decide: whether W. A. [Wiesengrund Adorno] has just a queer way of behaving of which he might be cured or whether he has a basically wrong attitude which might disqualify him in spite of his other abilities.'²⁹

Mechanical reproduction and musical abstraction

Lazarsfeld's emphatic normality would have provided exclusively thin ice as grounds for cooperation with Adorno, both personally and intellectually. He could not have made any sense of Adorno's conception of musical experience, in the post-Romantic tradition, as a potential for disintegrating and shattering the beautiful illusions of normality. Whatever Lazarsfeld had in mind for Adorno to do in the Princeton Radio Research Project had nothing to do with what was most on the mind of the newly appointed director of the Music Study. Whether the steamship *Champlain* had steered into dock in Tokyo or the Bay of Bengal, 'uppermost' for Adorno would have been exactly what it was prior to his departure from England: the pursuit of the conflictually dynamic group of ideas that had taken definitive shape for him in knowing Walter Benjamin. And at that moment of departure acute differences had emerged between them, most of all in Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935). In this essay Benjamin had forced the self-antagonistic struggle in the concept of culture to its limit. In aggrieved opposition to the art-religion of an elite who held their eyelids shut tight under the consoling magic that art spread over a foundering society, he sought to demolish that glow, to tear art away from its spell-binding semblance and, at the price of art itself, achieve a societal-wide power of critical observation that would once again restore both art and the artist to its people under the red banner of the *peuple*. Benjamin's messianically conceived essay was a programme for valuing art in its utmost subjugation to its industrial antagonist, the machinery of mechanical

reproduction, as the one hope of an art that would achieve art's aim in its utter self-renunciation.

Anyone half attentive to history's pathos for the isomorphic, that paradox in which extremes do not just touch, but embrace and fuse as one, may already have noted that, however antithetical their reasoning, however opposed the asserted purposes, Benjamin's thesis of the mechanical emancipation of art from art in the service of the masses and Lazarsfeld's institution committed to the facilitation and measurement of broadcast culture in the service of a waiting nation were identical. Jointly, they presented a programme for the reproduction of art as an ideal. This convergence of views was self-evident to Adorno. To his mind, the United States broadcasting system, which Lazarsfeld was promoting, had effectively set out to put the cognate intentions of Benjamin's essay to a nationwide test. In this context, Adorno conceived his work as the director of the Music Study division at the Princeton project as a responsibility to comprehend the ways in which the results of this test would criticize and require the transformation of every one of Benjamin's theses. Adorno would use the results of this criticism to build a case for arguing strenuously and ingeniously against the plans that Lazarsfeld's project embodied for the promotion of cultural treasures on radio. This double-edged critique, how Adorno would argue at once against Benjamin and Lazarsfeld and where this critique would lead in the development of Adorno's thinking, is what is fascinating in *Current of Music*. It defines the terms in which the manuscript to this day continues to draw into itself, into its own thinking, the most contemporary issues of aesthetics, perception and politics.

It is, however, important to realize at this point, as much as it was emphasized at the outset of this introduction, that Adorno was not in any way determined to defeat Benjamin's work. The alliance in the thinking of the two men was what motivated their conflict, and to the end Adorno's work remained a devoted critical transformation of Benjamin's thought in an effort to make good on it. If, all the same, a reader, having understood something of the complexity of this relationship, still needs to see what transpires in *Current of Music* as a tug of war unto death, there is a degree of truth to perceiving Adorno's wanting to recover what was prodigious in Benjamin's insights from its paradoxical entanglement in the social tendencies of which Lazarsfeld was the plenipotentiary.

It is also true that the examination to which Benjamin's essay was involuntarily subjected by the American radio broadcasting system came at it from a tangent for which it was ill-prepared. Benjamin's thesis that the mechanical reproduction of art would extract art treasures

from the aura of their politically burdensome authority by demolishing their claim to being one-of-a-kind – by annulling the spell they cast from their perpetually sacred distance – had been conceived exclusively in terms of print media and the visual arts, most of all cinema and photography. The Music Study of the Princeton project, however, under Adorno's directorship, examined the claims of Benjamin's seminal essay with regard to the reproduction of music. And the results of this study illuminated it in an altogether new way. Adorno had observed in listening to radio music that the humanizing content of the music that he had spent his life composing, reflecting on, and studying had vanished. Radio music, to Adorno's ears, was no longer *that* music. But, this was not because, as Benjamin had claimed, reproduction had made art music slough off its auratic cocoon. On the contrary, radio reproduction, Adorno would show, subjects the broadcast remnants of the artwork to a new spell; the remaindered husk becomes a new fetish. Mechanical reproduction does not destroy the primacy of the original, as Benjamin asserted, but rather it changes music into nothing but the search for an original to be possessed.

In terms of the development of his own thinking, this critical metamorphosis of Benjamin's thesis would allow Adorno to import the model of the reproduction of art from the visual arts, as Benjamin had developed it, into the discussion of music on a compositional level. Previously, Adorno had only considered reproduction in regard to music in terms of the question of techniques of distribution.³⁰ But his argument with Benjamin allowed him to incorporate the question of reproduction into the problematic of musical structure itself. This would provide him with a framework in which the entire modernist debate over the questions of abstraction and representational and non-representational forms could be developed in the analysis of music. Thus Adorno effectively carried out an exchange of aesthetic motifs with Benjamin, almost an exchange of sensorial capacities since, as any review of the topics chosen in his *Collected Writings* demonstrates, Adorno was least involved in and responsive to the visual arts. By acquiring for music the critical perspectives of the art form of the vanguard of aesthetic revolution, he wanted to introduce into Benjamin's late aesthetics, which had nothing to say about music, the imagelessness of music as a fundamental critique of a theory of reproduction that, in its messianic espousal of the reproduction of art, had itself failed to grasp the radical content of aesthetic modernism in the visual arts. Thus, although *Current of Music*, the work in which he would carry out this thinking, would not be published, it did function as a kind of lens through which Adorno's early thinking was focused and, transformed, projected forward.

Looking through this reassembled lens even now, it is possible to discern for the first time in Adorno's writings the cardinal ideas of the *Philosophy of New Music* and *Aesthetic Theory*.

Unmusical music and spatialization

Within months of arriving in the United States, along with finishing his monograph *In Search of Wagner*, Adorno had written a full-scale theoretical memorandum on radio broadcast music. In letters to colleagues and friends, he announced the completion of the memorandum. To Benjamin he wrote,

My major report on the radio research, in effect a small book, has also been completed in the meantime, and it has also been decided that the results of my work on music and radio should appear as an independent and probably substantial volume with Princeton University Press, and that means prominently too. In this connection I am also thinking of a shorter piece in German on the regression of listening and the fetish character in music.³¹

From the tone of this letter, Adorno – whose prolificness was reputed – seems to have impressed even himself with the more than 160-page single-spaced, marginless study, finished so soon after his arrival and written in English. The pace of the writing, however, in combination with work on the Wagner study, indicated not only an intensity of labour but also that, at such an early date, this focal involvement would have precluded almost anything beyond the writing itself. The manuscript on radio could hardly have been based on substantial experience of the United States, about which the immigrant had not known much to begin with. It was the result of a set of ideas that had taken shape substantially prior to immigration and long held in preparation to converge in the problem that Lazarsfeld's institute presented to him. The memorandum that resulted, *Music in Radio* – drafted in two large sections, with an eponymously titled first part, the second part entitled 'Radio in Music' – would become the working manuscript for *Current of Music*.

As often happened in his work, Adorno began the study by completing a long draft that collected the material for the project. Much could happen to this draft: it could be radically condensed, reorganized, and sometimes expanded again as a final text. In the case of *Music in Radio*, however, the capacious manuscript was developed in several different directions, then broken up again and reworked in a group of overlapping variants. In the first stage of his plans for *Music*

in Radio, as Adorno indicated to Benjamin in his letter, the text would be the primary source for the essay 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening',³² which would be written during the summer of 1938. Then, in response to a request from Lazarsfeld to summarize and clarify the long, initial memorandum, Adorno presented its central ideas to his colleagues at the Princeton project in a lecture-essay in January 1939 entitled 'Music and Radio'.³³ This essay once again reoriented and refocused the material of *Music in Radio*. The reconceived memorandum was then rewritten and much transformed during the following year in two drafts: as *Radio Physiognomics*³⁴ and as *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory, Section II: The Radio Voice*,³⁵ a text for which no other sequentially numbered sections seem to exist. Adorno also prepared a much-transformed and abbreviated version of the latter text, titled 'The Radio Voice: An Experiment in Theory', dated 1 September 1941.³⁶

Although the initial draft involved several permutations, Adorno carried through the central thesis of *Music in Radio* with complete consistency. From the outset, and with increasing distinctness, the text is a physiognomical study that seeks to decipher the general social tendencies in the phenomena of radio broadcast music. The tendency discerned in the phenomena is a mode of production that, Adorno shows, characteristically imitates nature rather than fulfilling its own productive potential. The aim of the study is to demonstrate in detail the depredations that music undergoes when it is subjected to this mode of production: when broadcast artifice endeavours to appear as pristine nature, when sonic copy lays claim to origin, when music on the air acts as the reproduction of an original.

Radio music in its early decades offered itself to such an interpretation in a way that it no longer does, or certainly not so insistently. Contemporary radio music today is almost exclusively the broadcast of recorded sound, and in popular music that sound is itself predominantly electronically sampled sound to start with. It is now the exception that radio music presents itself as the sound of an original, in the sense of the reproduction of live voices and acoustic instruments that are of a qualitatively different nature from the transmission itself. But prior to the early 1940s, the broadcast of recorded music on phonograph discs occurred only on avant-garde radio stations, and even then only by way of exception. Otherwise, all radio music presented performances of live vocal and instrumental music from either the studio or the concert hall. Radio, in other words, most of all staked its claim on the degree of its achieved ability to reproduce live music as natural sound, ostensibly every bit as immediately alive in the home as if the radio mechanism itself was transparent in transmission and played no

part at all in the sound. But, as Adorno would meticulously demonstrate, radio sets in the 1930s could achieve this illusion only very imperfectly: they were limited to the reception of AM transmissions that excluded substantial parts of the upper and lower frequency ranges; they could not balance the instrumental sound that they did register; and monaural reproduction further diluted orchestral dynamics. To the attentive listener, this music seemed to have been projected against a broadly warped mirror of background noise from which it infiltrated with the hissing electricals of signal drift and vacuum tube. Adorno ingeniously named this ever-present background surface of sound, against which the performance seemed projected, the 'hear-stripe' – a kind of sound that is now hardly to be heard except in the split-second ionization when, for instance, a TV set is switched on.

Adorno's own expert familiarity with the sound of vocal and acoustic instruments could not have been more exacting or self-conscious, and he, if anyone, could document with exactitude the divergence between live performance and broadcast music. But while Adorno was thorough in his critique of radio reception, his approach was the exact opposite of the finickiness of an audiophile. He had no doubt that the distortion impinged on the performance, and he demonstrated how it fragmented the work and undermined perception of the composition as a whole. Yet Adorno was not concerned to find ways to wipe out these degrees of distortion any more than he would have wanted to take paint brush in hand to set the eyes level in a Picasso portrait. In a sense, he was more the ally of the distortion than of 'classical music' transmission. And, in any case, he did not think that any degree of technical improvement would exclude the distortion of broadcast radio music. The distortion was implicit in the fundamental problem, that of the structure of broadcast itself, and it was this structure, not the distortion, that Adorno argued was directly opposed to the form of music. Music, he claimed, in utter disagreement with the aesthetic assumptions of Benjamin's thesis, has no original. To exist, it must be performed. In the performance of music, origin truly is the goal – the last step, so to speak, not the first.

Radio broadcast, in contrast with a live performance, transforms music into a relation between original and reproduction. The original necessarily becomes a fetish that the reproduction seeks to achieve, but without possible success, for the original that has been posited is an illusory origin whereas the object of the musical performance, what it makes, what is there conceivably to experience, has vanished. Adorno was able to explicate just what could no longer be experienced by showing, in an analysis of a Beethoven symphony, that the

form of music is the process in which it consumes its own extension in time. This process, he argued, is what was no longer audible in the broadcast of a Beethoven symphony, and not only because of the distortion and interference that damages the dynamic conflicts of the music but because, ultimately, in radio broadcast, music is spatialized. This spatialization is what is heard in the projection of the performance against the hear-stripe. The music thus obtains an image quality that puts in place of the consumption of its own musical time something akin to watching a movie. In broadcast reproduction, then, the music becomes an image, a picture of the music that is antithetical to the inherent imagelessness of its temporal dynamic. While the broadcast immanently lays claim to the sound of nature in the sense of providing what listeners presumed to be occurring behind the microphone, music necessarily surrendered its power over time and was no longer a Beethoven symphony. The depotentiated and fragmented object thus came to exist as an object of exchange, a standardized commodity that served as a reservoir of secondary, infantile satisfactions and magical authority, the very qualities that Adorno would show in other sections of *Current of Music* to be those of a conformist popular music. Adorno cast this argument with Benjamin as a fundamental criticism of the Princeton Radio Research Project's assumptions of the cultural and educative value of broadcast music. If the music could not be experienced, in what sense could it be said that 'cultural treasures' had been brought to the masses? If the music in every sense failed to arrive in anyone's home in such a way that it could be heard for what it is, how could this music fulfil the educative and humanizing aim that was said to be its content?

Adorno did not see any solution to this deficiency in radio reproduction. He assumed that there would be improvements to transmission, such as were soon enough brought about by FM and, later, stereo, but he held that ameliorations in one area would be paid for in other dimensions of sound. Contemporary experience confirms this: the superseding of the phonograph record by the compact disc intensified the clarity of sound but conspicuously simplified it; the compact disc circumvented the crackling background screen against which the phonograph performance was projected, but replaced it with a background screen that differs only by its total silence, without dissolving the image quality of the sound itself. This can be confirmed by walking around an acoustic piano in performance and comparing that sound with what comes out of any number of speakers.

But whether today the problem of musical reproduction has or has not been resolved, Adorno thought that the structure of the problem was insuperable. Since this knot could not be untied, it must be

severed. The performance of music on radio would no longer struggle against the unnatural quality of faulty reproduction or the image quality of the hear-stripe if it surrendered the claim to being an imitation of nature in the first place. 'Radio could succeed at this if, instead of broadcasting the reproduction of music, it played on the radio itself: The idea is that we should no longer broadcast over the radio but play on the radio in the same sense that one plays on a violin.'³⁷ This would transform every dimension of radio: Freed from a delusive goal, technique would no longer be preoccupied with ameliorating transmission and consolidating the illusion that radio music is the broadcast of the pristine nature of an original performance; radio studios would not aspire to the conjuration of phantasmagorical conservatories filled with potted ferns; radio design would not have reason to imitate chassis in the likeness of acoustic instruments. Radio would become a musical instrument. Its technique would engage the full productive range of the instrument's electrical phenomena. Distortion would not vie with normality of sound and the hear-stripe itself would become a compositional source. Instead of struggling to present itself as a transparent device of exchange and functioning to transform art into neutralized cultural goods, radio would explode the commodity relation and its shallow spell and present the human object of experience itself. Emancipated from the reproduction of an illusion of nature, radio music would potentially achieve the sound of a veridical second nature. Adorno cited the Theremin as an instance of a productive power that, when utterly emancipated from imitation, becomes the expression of a new nature: 'A feature which should be remarked . . . is that the more the Theremin instrument emancipates itself from any instrumental models, the more it approaches the sound of the singing voice – certainly without trying to come to any *vox humana effect*.'³⁸

The thesis of playing on radio rather than broadcasting over it is intriguing for itself, for its many implications, and not least of all because it would not turn out even if all nations banded together to work on the project. And then too, if it did somehow work, it would have the nightmarish quality of kitchen appliances swaying and singing to themselves. It is important to know, however, that, while Adorno pursued the logic of this speculation, he had no illusions such music existed and was plainly sceptical that such radio music could exist. Neither was he averse to the contradiction in his argument. On the contrary, he freely stated the need for such radio music even while debunking its possibility. Thus, in the lecture 'Music and Radio' of January 1939, after condensing the central ideas of *Music in Radio*, and restating the thesis that radio must emancipate itself from the reproduction

of sound, he went on to say that even the relentless optimist could not be optimistic about the attempts that had so far been made to compose specifically for radio; the whole idea, in fact, of producing music to suit the construction of a tool was, in his words, 'funny and paradoxical': 'We confess our utmost skepticism as far as the creation of so-called positive contents out of the tool is concerned.'³⁹

But why would Adorno be both the proponent and so severe a sceptic of the thesis? If he did not think that radio could be the instrument of its own sound, if he saw a need to distinguish tool from spiritualized musical instrument – as, for instance, John Cage would not – why did he assert the thesis in *Music in Radio*, restate it in his lecture even while confuting it, and return to assert the idea of 'playing on radio' in the last complete draft that that text would take, *Radio Physiognomics*? The contradiction is not an oversight. It is a summary formulation of what Adorno undertook to demonstrate in the Princeton Radio Research Project but stated as radio's antinomy. It expresses what radio must be and cannot be: the self-manifestation of its own content. No doubt the thesis, immediately coupled with its denial, bewildered his colleagues. The pragmatic Lazarsfeld would have thought Adorno ridiculous to present a plan and in the same breath dismiss its goal.

Adorno could have helped his colleagues make sense of his thesis had he provided the reasoning of the conundrum. But throughout his work at the Princeton project he hesitated genuinely to explain himself. This hesitation was not emotional but structural. As he wrote to Ernst Krenek right at the beginning of the project,

In the last few days I finished my large memorandum for the Radio Project (a small book), in which the *concept of new music* – in our sense – plays a substantial role, without of course my having been able in the framework of this memorandum to define exactly what I mean by that.⁴⁰

Thus, the concept of new music itself, atonal music, defined the perspective of the memorandum in general and the antinomy of radio in particular. This concept was not included in the memorandum for the Princeton project because it took shape in opposition to radio music so completely that it would have effectively expressed Adorno's actual non-participation in the goals of that project. It is not only – as Adorno wrote years later – that the work for the Princeton project 'contained the core of the *Philosophy of New Music* that was completed only in 1948'.⁴¹ The Princeton project came to contain this core of the work in the philosophy of music that marks the boundary of Adorno's mature aesthetics through the working out of

an antagonism. The two developed in inverse relation to each other. Presented here in their actual antagonistic juxtaposition, the limit of the former is seen to carve out the boundary that defined what the latter sought to fulfil: the limit of radio music – its inability to be the self-manifestation of its own content – is in the latter work presented as the achievement of new music. As Adorno wrote in *Philosophy of New Music*, what made new music new, its revolution, was that it no longer reproduced human emotion but became the immediate deposition of its own impulse in corporeal shocks and traumas:

The genuinely revolutionary element in his [Schoenberg's] music is the transformation of the function of expression. Passions are no longer faked; on the contrary, undisguised, corporeal impulses of the unconscious, shocks and traumas are registered in the medium of music.⁴²

An enormous body of thought is condensed here. Adorno's claim is that the atonal revolution in new music was fundamentally the critique of reproduction in the sense of the rejection of art as the imitation of subjectivity. And in the *Philosophy of New Music*, this formulation of the radical rejection of the replicative function in music derives from a comprehension of the history of the revolution of abstraction that had transpired in the visual arts. Just as painting was driven to non-representational forms under the pressure of photography, music is said to have become new music out of the need to defend itself against the commercial intrusion under the pressure of mechanically reproduced music:

That aversion of modern painting to figurative representation, which in art marks the same breach as does atonality in music, was an act of defense against mechanized art merchandise, primarily photography. In its origins, radical music reacted no differently to the commercial debasement of the traditional idiom. It was the antithesis to the spreading of the culture industry into its own domain.⁴³

Had Adorno found place in this statement of the origin of new music in opposition to the 'commercial debasement of the traditional idiom' to have added that new music would need to continue to assert this resistance against radio broadcast technology, the camera of musical photography, he would have documented the route by which he developed his thinking in the first place. *Philosophy of New Music* would throughout present the ideas that first emerged in Adorno's study of radio. In 'Stravinsky and the Restoration', for instance, the second part of *Philosophy of New Music* – a critique of