

Marcus Zagorski · Adorno and the Aesthetics  
of Postwar Serial Music



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*for Zoja Zagorski*

*who teaches the most important lessons  
without even trying*

## Introduction

Of the many thinkers who shaped debates about postwar serial music, there is no more influential figure than Theodor Adorno. He wrote extensively about music in general and serial music in particular, and he had first-hand knowledge of the serial method, which he shared in myriad ways. Adorno inspired postwar composers' philosophical engagement with serial techniques, and this book argues that the signs of his influence are clearly visible in the compositional theory and music aesthetics of the period, as well as in subsequent critical reception. Serialism was one of the most widely practiced and widely discussed methods of composition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its impact was due largely to its aesthetics—that is, to the ideas behind the music. This book presents an extensive examination of those ideas and places them in their historical, philosophical, and cultural contexts.

It is useful, perhaps even essential, to begin with definitions. Anyone reading these pages quite likely already knows something about the terms in the title: Adorno, aesthetics, serial music. But different readers will interpret these differently. In English and French, for example, “serial music,” or “musique serielle,” are used broadly to refer to any music that uses the serial principle, both when the series is applied only to the organization of pitch (as in the music of Arnold Schoenberg) and when it is applied to multiple elements of music at the same time, such as pitch, duration, loudness, and timbre (as in the music of many postwar serial composers). In German, by contrast, “serielle Musik” [serial music] has a much narrower meaning and is distinct from “Zwölftonmusik” [twelve-tone music]. Whereas “Zwölftonmusik” refers to music that uses the series only for the organization of pitch (again, as in the music of Schoenberg), “serielle Musik” refers specifically to compositional techniques developed in the 1950s and 1960s that explicitly differentiated themselves from Schoenberg’s pitch-based serialism and applied the series simultaneously to other so-called “parameters,” including duration, loudness, and timbre.<sup>1</sup> This book is primarily a study of serial music in the narrower, German sense of “serielle Musik.” The word “postwar” appears in the book’s title to help make that clear.

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1 For a detailed study of the history of these terms, see Christoph von Blumröder, “Serielle Musik,” in *Terminologie der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert* (Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie, Sonderband 1), ed. Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1995), 396-411. Translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

“Aesthetics” is another term that has different traditions of usage. The philosopher Wolfgang Iser has argued that aesthetics, as defined narrowly in philosophical encyclopedias and by philosophers in the discipline itself, would be more accurately named “artistics”: it is an “explication of art with particular attention to beauty.” As such, it does not respect the much more general “science of sensuous cognition” that was established by Alexander Baumgarten in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and for which he invented the name “aesthetics.” Aesthetics in the narrow sense—what Iser calls “artistics”—means only the philosophy of art, and Iser notes that this meaning was introduced by Immanuel Kant, developed by G.W.F. Hegel, and is still preferred by many philosophers today.<sup>2</sup> This book understands “aesthetics” in the narrow sense: it examines ideas about art. More specifically, it examines ideas about serial music, as they appear in philosophical texts and compositional theory. This includes ideas about what serial music is or what it should be, ideas about why it is or why it should be, ideas about where it came from or where it is going, ideas about its value or significance, and ideas about its connection to other realms of culture. These facets of the aesthetics of serial music are not separate and distinct; rather, they blend together, are subtly interconnected, and are linked to compositional technique. In fact, this is one of the most stimulating and challenging aspects of the aesthetics of serial music: texts that are ostensibly about compositional technique often include complex aesthetic positions and touch upon other branches of philosophy such as ethics and metaphysics, and other realms of culture such as politics, science, and history.

This rich combination of disciplines is nowhere more evident than in Adorno’s writings, and it is something that contributes to the notorious difficulty of his texts. This book therefore begins with explication: the purpose of Chapter One is to make Adorno’s music philosophy comprehensible, specifically in relation to his theory of new music. There are numerous other books that elucidate Adorno’s aesthetics, of course; but the aim in this book is to show how the elements of his philosophy serve his theory of new music and thereby influence the aesthetics of postwar serial music. The first three subsections of the first chapter identify and clarify essential strands in Adorno’s music philosophy: Hegel’s idea of an objective spirit, or *Geist*; Max Weber’s theory of the increasing rationalization of Western culture; Adorno’s own theory of a “dialectic of enlightenment,” developed in the book he co-authored with Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. These strands coalesce in a theory of musical material that is central to Adorno’s music philosophy. The fourth subsection of the chapter shows how the topics discussed in the preceding subsections converge in Adorno’s *Philosophie der neuen Musik* [*Philosophy of New Music*], the first half of which presents a study of Schoen-

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2 Wolfgang Iser, “Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics,” in *Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics*, vol. III: *Practical Aesthetics in Practice and Theory*, ed. Martti Honkanen (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 1997), 18-37.

berg's twelve-tone method. For Adorno, Schoenberg's control of musical material through rational organization parallels a larger social process in which subjectivity loses its freedom of expression and is subjugated by instrumental rationality. The loss of subjective freedom leads Adorno to propose a solution in the form of a theory of "new music," which is examined in the final subsection of the chapter.

The marriage of aesthetics, social theory, philosophy of history, ethics, and music is evident in a careful reading of Adorno's texts and, it must be said, the best introduction to his writing is through his own words: the brilliance, originality, complexity, and shortcomings of his thought can only be conveyed with reference to the form in which that thought was presented. And the brilliance and originality can be appreciated regardless of whether or not one agrees with him. Of the many texts he devoted to 20<sup>th</sup>-century music, there is none more essential than *Philosophie der neuen Musik*—essential both for its place in his music philosophy and for its reception among postwar composers. In that book, he described Schoenberg's twelve-tone method as "truly the fate of music":

The rules are not arbitrarily conceived. They are configurations of the historical obligation in material. [...] A system of the domination of nature results in music. It corresponds to a desire present since the beginnings of the bourgeois era: to grasp and order all sound, and to reduce the magic essence of music to human logic. [...] The subject dominates music through the rational system, only to fall victim to the rational system itself.<sup>3</sup>

These sentences appear in the first half of the book, titled "Schoenberg and Progress," and they need some unpacking.

Adorno's understanding of progress was not the usual one. Throughout his writings he argued that although we have little choice but to follow the dictates of historical progress, such progress may not always result in a better world—or better music. One must therefore, he believed, constantly assert subjective individuality against the collective historical process. This dialectic is the key to understanding the passage on Schoenberg's twelve-tone method quoted above, as well as much of Adorno's other writing about music. But understanding the dialectic itself is not straightforward, for it brings together the many strands of Adorno's

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3 "Die Zwölftontechnik ist wahrhaft ihr [music's] Schicksal. [...] Die Regeln sind nicht willkürlich ausgedacht. Sie sind Konfigurationen des geschichtlichen Zwanges im Material. [...] Ein System der Naturbeherrschung in Musik resultiert. Es entspricht einer Sehnsucht aus der bürgerlichen Urzeit: was immer klingt, ordnend zu 'erfassen,' und das magische Wesen der Musik in menschliche Vernunft aufzulösen. [...] Das Subjekt gebietet über die Musik durchs rationale System, um selber dem rationalen System zu erliegen." These sentences do not appear exactly in this order in Adorno's text; they have been rearranged to state his idea more directly. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* 12, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 65-68.

music aesthetics, including: the philosophy of Hegel; the social theory of Max Weber; and the “dialectic of enlightenment” Adorno conceived with Max Horkheimer. These topics are more thoroughly discussed in Chapter One, below, but it is useful to summarize them here as part of a general introduction.

The reason Schoenberg’s twelve-tone method is said to be “truly the fate of music” is the same reason that its “rules are not arbitrarily conceived”: according to Adorno, Schoenberg did not so much choose to compose in this way but was thought to be *required* to do so. Adorno believed that serial music resulted from a historical process in which musical expression developed through the breakdown of formal conventions, increasing chromaticism, and increasing dissonance to atonality, as well as (though not mentioned in the quotation above) through the use of the variation principle in the music of Beethoven, Wagner, and Brahms.<sup>4</sup> These developments were said to be consolidated in Schoenberg’s twelve-tone method and subjected to rational control. This belief, that a supposedly “objective” historical process directed the course of compositional technique, depends upon a philosophy of history that one can and should question. In other words, one should ask if there really was an *obligation* for Schoenberg to compose twelve-tone music, as Adorno claimed, or if Schoenberg merely *chose* to compose twelve-tone music. One should also note that Adorno’s historical narrative favors practices from a certain period of Austro-German music while ignoring other periods and other cultures—and ignoring, in this case, Schoenberg’s own reasons for inventing the twelve-tone method.

Adorno’s philosophy of history is even more evident in the next sentence of the passage quoted above: the rules of the twelve-tone method, he claimed, are “configurations of the historical obligation in material.” This “historical obligation” can be understood as a version of Hegel’s idea of an objective *Geist*, or “spirit,” that directs world-history. Adorno saw no problem in using Hegel’s idea, and he later admitted that it was a central theme in his *Philosophie der neuen Musik*.<sup>5</sup> But Adorno’s “objective spirit” was not strictly Hegelian. It depended also on Weber’s social theory of increasing rationalization in Western culture, and the connection to Weber helps us understand the next sentences of the quotation.<sup>6</sup> “A

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4 For more on Adorno’s ideas about the importance of the variation principle, see Giselher Schubert, “Adornos Auseinandersetzung mit der Zwölftontechnik Schönbergs,” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 46, no. 3 (1989): 238-40.

5 This admission was made in 1950 in response to a critical review of *Philosophie der neuen Musik*: see Theodor W. Adorno, “Mißverständnisse,” *Melos* 17 (1950): 75-7; later reprinted in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* 12, 203-6.

6 Adorno himself stressed the connection to Weber, writing elsewhere: “what carries *Geist* forward in music, the rationality principle that Max Weber rightly recognized as central, is nothing but the unfolding of extra-artistic, social rationality. This is what ‘appears’ in music.” See Theodor W. Adorno, *Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* 14, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 409.

system of the domination of nature results in music,” he wrote. “It corresponds to a desire present since the beginnings of the bourgeois era: to grasp and order all sound, and to reduce the magic essence of music to human logic.” This reads like a textbook example of Weber’s idea of *Entzauberung*, a literal translation of which is “the process of taking the magic out of something,” or “demystification.” Weber, a tremendously influential sociologist, wrote of the increasing rationalization of social practices in the Western world from the period of the Renaissance onward, and described this as entailing a belief that “whenever one desired, one could find that there are fundamentally no mysterious, incalculable forces involved [in things], but rather, that all things—in principle—can be controlled by means of calculation. But this means: the demystification [Entzauberung] of the world.”<sup>7</sup> Weber argued that this tendency went hand-in-hand with the progressive domination of nature, and Adorno described the twelve-tone method explicitly as a system by which music dominates nature.<sup>8</sup> For Adorno, the nature being dominated was both the sound material manipulated by the composer and also the expressive impulse of the composer himself; both were controlled by the rationality of the twelve-tone method, which reduced the “magic essence of music” by subjecting it to “human logic.”

The final sentence of the passage quoted above underscores Adorno’s critique of Schoenberg: “the subject dominates music through the rational system, only to fall victim to the rational system itself.” In other words, the effect of Schoenberg’s twelve-tone method of composition was that it enchained the composer and robbed him of his subjective freedom. But Schoenberg was not the only victim, according to Adorno. His compositional method mirrored a larger social process in which humans are robbed of their freedom and enslaved by the forces of rationalization.<sup>9</sup> This larger social theory was presented by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in which they critically examined the development

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The translation in this footnote taken from Max Paddison, *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 270-1.

- 7 The entire passage reads: “Die zunehmende Intellektualisierung und Rationalisierung bedeutet also nicht eine zunehmende allgemeine Kenntnis der Lebensbedingungen, unter denen man steht. Sondern sie bedeutet etwas anderes: das Wissen davon oder den Glauben daran: daß man, wenn man nur *wollte*, es jederzeit erfahren *könnte*, das es also prinzipiell, keine geheimnisvollen unberechenbaren Mächte gebe, die da hineinspielen, daß man vielmehr alle Dinge—im Prinzip—durch *Berechnen beherrschen* könne. Das aber bedeutet: die Entzauberung der Welt.” Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), 19.
- 8 For more on this point see Max Paddison, “The Language-Character of Music: Some Motifs in Adorno,” *Mit den Ohren denken: Adornos Philosophie der Musik*, ed. Richard Klein and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp), 75; see also Paddison, *Adorno’s Aesthetics*, 135-6.
- 9 Thus Adorno, elsewhere, referred to musical material as “sedimentierter Geist,” or “sedimented spirit”: an objectification in artistic material of larger social processes.

of Western culture up to the period of the Hitler regime and tried to understand “why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism,” the barbarism in this case referring not only to the rise of totalitarianism but also the manipulative forces of capitalism and the culture industry.<sup>10</sup> They argued that humans, for thousands of years, have tried to advance their own interests by means of the domination and control of nature. But these efforts, which were intended to liberate humans from the forces of nature, have developed into a new force that impedes the realization of liberation. In other words, our use of instrumental rationality to control nature now controls *us* and precludes our freedom: that is the dialectic of enlightenment.

The ideas presented in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* were essential for the Schoenberg critique in Adorno’s *Philosophie der neuen Musik*,<sup>11</sup> and *Philosophie der neuen Musik* was seen by Adorno as, he said, “definitive for everything that I wrote about music thereafter.”<sup>12</sup> Understanding these two texts will help one understand Adorno’s music aesthetics. Subsequently, as serial practices spread beyond the Schoenberg school in the 1950s and were developed by a younger generation of composers, Adorno believed his critique of twelve-tone music to be even more applicable to postwar serial music. As composers applied serial ordering not only to pitch but also to duration, loudness, and timbre, Adorno critiqued the further expansion of rational control and greater loss of subjective freedom. Postwar composers, on the other hand, equated serial techniques with historical progress and, unlike Adorno, they were not terribly concerned with the dialectics or discontents of that progress.

Chapter Two examines Adorno’s extensive involvement with postwar serial music, characterizes his reception among composers, and presents detailed analyses of his two most important essays on the music of that period. His engagement with postwar music was complex: his work was seen both as pointing the way forward and as hopelessly old-fashioned, and his ideas were often eagerly adopted only to be transformed into something nearly their opposite. This convoluted reception-history stems in part from misreadings of his texts, but it also parallels Adorno’s own changing positions on postwar music and ideas. The changes in his thinking (as well as the constants) can be seen by comparing his two central essays on postwar music, “Das Altern der neuen Musik” and “Vers une musique infor-

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10 See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), xi. For the original see *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*, in Theodor W. Adorno *Gesammelte Schriften* 3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), 11.

11 Adorno stated this explicitly in the preface: see Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 11.

12 “Die *Philosophie der neuen Musik* [...] war verbindlich für alles, was ich danach irgend über Musik schrieb.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Wissenschaftliche Erfahrungen in Amerika,” *Gesammelte Schriften* 10.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 702-38, at 719.

melle.” Chapter Two presents this comparison and does so against the backdrop of Adorno’s reception among serial composers. The extent to which Adorno’s ideas are a part of the compositional theory of postwar composers is then considered in Chapter Three.

Compositional theory blossomed in the postwar years, and it served as an important channel for serial aesthetics. As composers reinvented music from the ground up, they used theoretical writings to justify the techniques they employed, and these writings often contained ideas that were seeded by Adorno’s music philosophy (even if they frequently did not resemble that philosophy). Chapter Three examines the diverse body of compositional theory penned by serial and post-serial composers and identifies key ideas therein, chief among which is the linkage of musical material and technique with a belief in historical progress. As composers explored new aspects of sound and subjected these to rational organization, they believed themselves to be pushing history forward, with new musical materials providing physical evidence for each new stage of progress. The continual search for new material fashioned a thread that bound together vastly different personalities, and similar ideas about progress and material linked diverse approaches to, and developments from, serialism. Chapter Three considers the discourse about progress and technique not only in relation to the influence of Adorno, but also in relation to a specific historical moment and cultural environment. It provides, thereby, social and historical context for serial aesthetics alongside the philosophical context.

One example of the narrative of progress many post-war serial composers shared can be seen in a passage from an essay on musical form by the composer György Ligeti:

After Schoenberg had found a rule-based method for ordering free atonality, the serial principle, which was first applied only to the dimension of pitch, strove for expansion to the totality of form. This led to the discrete quantification of all parameters, through which such music became the result of overlapping prefabricated arrangements [...] But only shortly after durations, intensities and timbres had been serially organized, the expansion of this method sought to cover more global categories, such as relationships between [different] registers and densities, and distributions of types of movement and structure, as well as the proportioning of the entire course of form.<sup>13</sup>

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13 “Die solcherart installierte chromatische Republik bedurfte aber ihrer eigenen gesetzlichen Ordnung. Nachdem Schönberg sie gefunden hatte, strebte das zunächst nur für die Dimension der Tonhöhen aufgestellte serielle Prinzip zur Ausbreitung auf die Totalität der Form. Dies leitete zu jener diskreten Quantifizierung aller Parameter, durch die solche Musik zum Produkt aus Überschneidungen präfabrizierter Anordnungen wurde [...] Kaum waren jedoch Zeitdauern, Intensitätsgrade und Klangfarben seriell organisiert, suchte die Expansion dieser Methode globalere Kategorien zu umfassen, wie Register- und Dichteverhältnisse, Verteilungen von Bewegungs- und Strukturtypen, zugleich

What Ligeti described here is the postwar development of serialism in Western Europe, from a method that applied serial order only to pitch to a method that applied serial order to many other aspects of music. The reason his description is related to Adorno's aesthetic theory is because Ligeti implied that the serial method did not result from the preferences and decisions of composers, but it resulted from some larger historical process. Although Ligeti did not explicitly invoke an "objective spirit" as did Adorno, that spirit is working behind the scenes. In Ligeti's telling, it was not the subjective decisions and aesthetic preferences of composers creating history, rather, it was compositional technique, and history itself, that directed composers' actions.

Many other serial composers believed in this historical narrative and thereby ignored the role their own personal preferences had in choosing compositional techniques. By the late 1950s and early 1960s (the time in which Ligeti's essay appeared), a diversity of composers refused to let this myth die. Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono, and Dieter Schnebel, among others, saw serialism as a logical consequence of history. Nono, in his essays, cited the same stages of historical development found in Ligeti's essay<sup>14</sup>; Schnebel did as well, and even proposed additional stages to continue this kind of progress.<sup>15</sup> Schnebel has been seen, by some at least, as a critic of serialism; but he did, in fact, preserve the historical narrative so essential to its aesthetics. Ligeti also was seen as a critic of serialism, and the essay from which the quotation above is taken was interpreted by some as nothing less than "the epitome of an *anti*-serialist manifesto."<sup>16</sup> The fact that this historical narrative was maintained by these supposed critics of serialism, and remained relatively long in circulation, shows the extent to which serial aesthetics also influenced post-serial music and ideas.

Indeed, there are no epitaphs in the history of ideas. For that which may seem dead and past to some, is still alive and present for others. Chapter Four of this book shows how the aesthetics of serialism, and the music philosophy of Adorno, extend beyond the decades in which they appeared: they were adopted and adapted by those who wished to preserve their ideals, even after being critiqued as belonging to the past. The musicologist Carl Dahlhaus was intimately familiar with both the writings of Adorno and the aesthetics of postwar serialism, and he

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auch Proportionierung des gesamten Formablaufes." György Ligeti, "Wandlungen der musikalischen Form," *die Reihe* 7 (1960): 5-17, at 5.

- 14 Luigi Nono, "Die Entwicklung der Reihentechnik," in *Texte: Studien zu seiner Musik*, ed. Jürg Stenzl (Zürich: Atlantis, 1975), 21.
- 15 Dieter Schnebel, "Das musikalische Material: Verhältnisse und Aktionen," in *Denkbare Musik: Schriften 1952-1972*, ed. Hans Rudolf Zeller (Cologne: DuMont, 1972), 286-8.
- 16 "Für manche Leser galt sie [Ligeti's 'Bestandsaufnahme', or stocktaking] als Manifest der Antiserialität schlechthin, für andere als vorurteilsvolle traditionalistisch orientierte Zeitdiagnose." Gianmario Borio, *Musikalische Avantgarde um 1960: Entwurf einer Theorie der informellen Musik* (Laaber: Laaber, 1993), 33.

dedicated numerous essays to these topics. His research on postwar music identified what he called the “fundamental aesthetic paradigm” of serial and post-serial music, and he argued that this paradigm was informed by the aesthetic theory of Adorno and the related compositional theory of serial composers. He was critically aware that although metanarratives of historical progress were becoming unfashionable by the 1970s and 1980s, they were still worth studying, for they did much to shape historical reality. But if Dahlhaus saw the ideas of Adorno and serial composers lose prestige in the 1970s, his early death in 1989 prevented him from seeing their continued relevance for a generation of composers active since the 1990s. One of the most prolific of this generation is Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, who has written extensively about the aesthetics of contemporary composition. Mahnkopf’s work is indebted to the ideas of Adorno and serial composers, but he does not try merely to resurrect a bygone age. Instead, he uses the aesthetic changes that brought that age to an end as a call to revitalize contemporary composition. In so doing, he shows one way in which Adorno and the aesthetics of postwar serial music continue to live on and influence music and thinking today.

