

## Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

Theodor W. Adorno. 2002. *Essays on Music*. Selected, with introduction, commentary, and notes by Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie et al. Berkeley: University of California Press. Bibliography, 743 pp. ISBN 0-5202- 3159-7 (paperback)

Murray Dineen

Volume 24, numéro 1, 2003

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014679ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014679ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

### ISSN

0710-0353 (imprimé)

2291-2436 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Dineen, M. (2003). Compte rendu de [Theodor W. Adorno. 2002. *Essays on Music*. Selected, with introduction, commentary, and notes by Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie et al. Berkeley: University of California Press. Bibliography, 743 pp. ISBN 0-5202- 3159-7 (paperback)]. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 24(1), 133–136. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014679ar>

All Rights Reserved © Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes, 2005

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

the “splendid trio of orchestral works from late-period Anhalt” would fit perfectly on a seventy-minute audio CD to provide “a fine gift to future generations” (p. 130). Benjamin, in preparing his analysis of Anhalt’s symphony, cites “a remote descendant of a master tape of a 1960 performance of the Toronto Symphony under Walter Susskind” (p. 303). Although this recording is apparently inadequate for commercial release, one laments the fact that we, as readers, are not able to consult it while reading Benjamin’s analysis. The possibility of listening to this and other compositions would certainly allow for a deeper understanding of the individual works discussed in the book. It would also lead to a greater overall appreciation of Anhalt’s significance as a composer.

With the recent release of a two-CD set devoted to Anhalt’s music on Centredisc’s *Canadian Composers Portraits* series, the situation has improved slightly.<sup>1</sup> In addition to a remastered recording of *Foci* from 1969, the disc also contains a live recording of *The Tents of Abraham*, a new work that was composed after the publication of *Pathways and Memory*.<sup>2</sup> Still, there are many more works that could and should be available on disc. The value of *Pathways and Memory* is that it situates Anhalt at the forefront of contemporary composers, not only in Canada, but internationally. One hopes that it will foster interest in Anhalt’s music and instigate future performances and recordings. The details of Anhalt’s life and his compositional style have been presented thoroughly and eloquently. His importance as a composer has been argued with conviction. His music needs to be heard.

## REFERENCE

Anhalt, István. 1984. *Alternative Voices: Essays on Contemporary Vocal and Choral Composition*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

J. Drew Stephen

Theodor W. Adorno. 2002. *Essays on Music*. Selected, with introduction, commentary, and notes by Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie et al. Berkeley: University of California Press. Bibliography, 743 pp. ISBN 0-5202-3159-7 (paperback).

*Happiness for Adorno was social. Personal happiness in the face of general social unhappiness (injustice) was false by definition; it resided in the realm of social privilege, a socio-psychic gated community (p. 514).*

It is wrong to say that Adorno chose not to like popular music and jazz. Truth be known, he was prevented from liking it by a certain logic in his scholarly

---

<sup>1</sup>CMCCD 10204. The two-CD set includes an audio CD of Anhalt’s compositions and a full-length documentary on the composer’s life and music.

<sup>2</sup>Robin Elliott’s review of the premiere performance of *The Tents of Abraham* is published in *The Institute for Canadian Music Newsletter* 2, no. 2 (May 2004): 12. An online edition can be accessed at <http://www.utoronto.ca/icm/newsletter.html> (PDF).

background (which he came by honestly) and by certain aspects of his world that were thrust upon him. And he was prevented from liking classical music in equal fashion. (This fact is seldom protested by classical music scholars with the vehemence of their jazz and popular music counterparts, which merely confirms a regrettable apathy toward Adorno on the part of classical music scholarship.) Given his inheritance from Hegel, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, the tragedy of the Second World War, and his exile to North America, and worse yet New Jersey, Adorno had no choice in the matter. Circumstance contrived to render him incapable of merely *liking* music.

The reason why is set forth in the epigraph above, taken from Richard Leppert's recent collection of Adorno essays. In order to praise a thing, anything, you must first be happy yourself, graced with a felicitous state of mind. As a scholar, Adorno was profoundly unhappy, tormented by a permanently unfelicitous state of mind, and thus prevented from liking music.

Liking music is taken by us almost for granted now as a precondition of good critical music scholarship. It needs to be said, however, that our felicitous approach to music separates us from a great many of our fellow scholars for whom "liking" their subject matter is irrelevant if not a lapse of scholarly propriety (consider scholars of Nazi music, Pol Pot's regime, or farther afield those who study criminals, child pornography, or the effects of inorganic poisons on the human body). This liking business—call it appreciation, fandom, taste—is not entirely critical and a good part of it is happily solecistic. And in this sense, we ought to appreciate Adorno as a corrective, no matter how much we find what he has to say distasteful.

Leppert's collection comprises twenty-seven essays rendered by various translators, of which fifteen appear in very capable translations by Susan Gillespie, twelve for the first time. The book is divided into four parts, each addressing an important topic in Adorno's oeuvre (modernity, media, mass culture, and central-European music), and each prefaced with a commentary by the editor. It concludes with a short but comprehensive bibliography. Taken as a whole and with emphasis on the editor's commentaries, the book serves readily as a beginner's guide to Adorno and music, certainly not "Adorno for Dummies," were such a thing possible, but instead a whirlwind tour of the major issues in music and brief sketches here and there of the essence of Adorno's critique. Leppert's commentary in particular offers a brief and user-friendly introduction, one currently lacking in Adorno music studies. Max Paddison's two books, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (1997) and *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture* (1996) would have fulfilled this function were they not too complex and of too broad a scope for an entry level (and thus make good reading after Leppert's collection, alongside Susan Buck-Morss's excellent *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* [1977], and recent work by Lydia Goehr). Not all the essays are new. Some are old chestnuts, basic and thus necessary, and hitherto circulated largely in faint photocopies. "On Jazz," from 1936, and "On Popular Music," from 1941, for example, are good entry points into Adorno's popular music critique. But they ought to be read alongside

“Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” from 1963, as a counterfoil. In all three instances—popular, jazz, and classical—the idea of a critical social element to music appreciation (music as social critique, and not merely positivist sociology) is espoused.

Don’t be put off by the apparent distaste for jazz. Despite his attempt to “rescue” Wagner, as Leppert puts it, Adorno is harder on the composer than on the musicians of jazz and popular music, since Wagner was by far the less scrupulous. As Leppert points out, jazz was naively valuable to Adorno as a symptom. He cites Adorno thus: “In [jazz] is expressed, wordlessly, like the alienation of art and society, a kind of overall state of reality that words are lacking to express. This vacuum may be wordless, but it is no false consciousness” (p. 360). A much greater alienation is expressed in Wagner, albeit not wordlessly, since Wagner’s inexhaustible ability to grind out self-adulation was but an anticipation of the critical solipsism that became the Wagner of Nazi Germany.

The most difficult essays are devoted to Beethoven and to Schoenberg, for here it would seem at first blush that Adorno leaves behind his critical remove, the distanced “negative” appraisal he affords Wagner and Jazz. Such is not the case, for neither Beethoven nor Schoenberg are “happy,” at least not in the philosophic sense. Classical music scholarship could do well to address Adorno’s classical music critiques as a means of shedding its veneer of happiness—a CBC Two “wuneful, wuneful” veneer that will soon make it irrelevant to truly critical studies. In this regard, Leppert’s justified assertion that “Adorno unambiguously admired” (p. 558) Schoenberg is apt. He did admire Schoenberg, but not without reservation, and a more sustained treatment of Adorno’s appraisal of Schoenberg as naive (see p. 629, for example) would have been welcome. On the other hand, Leppert brings to the fore the problems Beethoven posed for Adorno as never before: what Adorno calls Beethoven’s “ostentation,” a “prefiguration of mass culture, which celebrates its own triumphs.” Beethoven sometimes sounds contrived, as if the effects have been calculated, which Adorno likens to a “moment of ham-acting.” He suggests that at times Beethoven’s genius employs compositional technique to “manufacture transcendence.” And in a note to himself he confides: “the manipulation of transcendence, the coercion, the violence. This is probably the deepest insight I have yet achieved into Beethoven. It is profoundly connected to the nature of art as appearance” (p. 521). This is surely destiny knocking on the door of Beethoven scholarship (which Susan McClary answered, albeit controversially).

The one thing missing from the collection, both essays and commentaries, is a sustained treatment of Adorno’s methodological principle of negativity, the so-called “negative dialectic.” Readers will have to turn elsewhere, principally Susan Buck-Morss’s work, for a concept without which they will eventually find themselves severely handicapped in dealing with Adorno’s thought. This caveat aside, the collection is a necessity for the Adorno novice and devotee alike.

But in truth Adorno's critique has much to offer a music scholar otherwise disinterested in his approach. It offers us a paradigm for a methodology devoid of happiness. Let us say that, in a cataclysmic upheaval of the kind visited with chilling frequency upon our neighbours in third-world countries, your world were overturned. You lost your health by exposure to toxins or malaria, lost your family as civilian collateral in a less than senseless war, saw your country ravaged by foreign powers, your religion disfigured by hatred and prejudice, would you be justified ever again in being happy, in writing poetry, in doing scholarship? Adorno's condition is but a hair's breadth from ours, be it by nuclear trigger, by ecological crisis, by pestilence, or some other such affliction. Good fortune prevents us from recognizing how deeply we are indebted to him for a scholarly remove that might allow us faintest hope in direst circumstance. What price happiness?

#### REFERENCES

- Buck-Morss, Susan. 1977. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. New York: The Free Press.
- Paddison, Max. 1996. *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture: Essays on Critical Theory and Music*. London: Kahn & Averill.
- . 1997. *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. First published 1993.

Murray Dineen