Transition was founded more than thirty years ago in Uganda by the late Rajat Neogy and quickly established itself as a leading forum for intellectual debate. The first series of issues developed a reputation for tough-minded, far-reaching criticism, both cultural and political, and this new series carries on the tradition.
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Cover photo of
Rajat Negi reading
Transition 32, 1987
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Courtesy of
Bobana Laptek Negi.
Alex Ross

Thomas Mann, eerily nicknamed the Magician by his own children, did not hesitate to use the people nearest him in his art. Anyone who crossed his path could be conjured away into fiction’s limbo. After completing his final major novel, however, he felt uneasy; one of his literary creations had cast a spell of its own. *Doktor Faustus*, the “novel of music,” depended on the prior work and day-to-day counsel of a younger writer so heavily that public acknowledgment seemed due. Mann took the unusual step of issuing a literary memoir in which various borrowings were disclosed. He also gave the “musical adviser” a brief but spectacular cameo in the novel itself. When the doomed Faustian composer, feeling the onset of syphilitic dementia, hallucinates a conversation with the Devil, he sees before him “a member of the intelligentsia, writer on art, on music for the ordinary press, a theoretician and critic, who himself composes, so far as thinking allows him”—Doktor Adorno.

Mann could not have guessed that this obscure “theoretician and critic,” a fellow emigré and Hollywood neighbor during World War II, would eventually win an esoteric renown far beyond the pages of *Doktor Faustus*. Returning to Germany in 1949, Theodor W. Adorno became an academic institution in his final years, presiding over the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. In music, he was the iconic explainer of early Viennese modernism and a buttress for the postwar European avant-garde. After his death in August of 1969, three days before the Manson murders, he unexpectedly emerged as a thinker of general importance, an oft-quoted oracle of the late-modern, post-Holocaust world. His gladiatorial attacks on the “culture industry” (with their biases reversed) form a model for the multidisciplinary “cultural studies” of today. Reprinted in Frankfurt School anthologies, his essays on commodity fetishism and late-capitalist reification cause nightmares on college campuses across the country.

If Adorno has not actually become
the Devil, he is, at the very least, the great nay-sayer, the father of negations. On the left, he is deeply suspect for his quietistic nihilism. On the right, he is naturally loathed for his deep-grained, though highly attenuated, Marxism. Proponents of pop culture denounce him for the thoroughgoing elitism, bordering on racism, exhibited in his notorious essay “Jazz.” Defenders of Western tradi-

tion denounce his contrary contempt for commercial high culture, which he considered a moribund self-parody falling victim to the same forces driving the popular. Culture itself is going away, he proclaimed, leaving a husk of itself behind. Only a small handful of twentieth-century artistic fragments—Beckett, Kafka, Schoenberg, Berg—survived the catastrophe, floating Voyager II-like through the deep space of Adornian prose. His desolation had an aristocratic air; in Georg Lukács’s deadly quip, he looked at the world through the glass floor of the Grand Hotel Abyss.

Adorno’s negative delirium undermines most potential applications of his social theory. An all-pervading conception of a “totality” governing social life collapses into picturesque tautology in this work; what matters most is the frisson of the phrase. It might be said that secretly he is style and nothing but. Rhetoric swirls in all directions; the famous arrogantly clanging phrases—“the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant,” “all poetry after Auschwitz is garbage”—fall side by side with instances of morose self-parody, like the surreal aphorisms on punctuation in Notes to Literature (“In the dash, thought becomes aware of its fragmentary character.”) Gillian Rose has called his style “eminently quotable, but egregiously misconstruable.” Like Mann, like Nietzsche, like Karl Kraus, Adorno practiced an irony so heavy and deep that his whole body of work is an all-or-nothing proposition, a life written out on a limb.

But there are certain areas where Adorno still finds deeper resonances, most notably in the realm of music. His cherished idea of a music in resistance to society—a “passionate protest of convention”—carries weight because the art of music has almost always found itself in resistance to society, in one form or another. Moreover, Adorno brings himself to address a particular music, materially rather than rhetorically defined. What is always forgotten is that music, and the embattled world of musical modernism in particular, served as his professional home ground; all the other murky tributaries flow from the watershed of his musical experience. Academic commentators have generally suffered from only a glancing acquaintance with his musical writings, which lie at the core of his thought and comprise nearly half of the twenty-two volumes of the Suhrkamp Adorno edition. He studied composition with Alban Berg and made an early living as a music critic; as a musicologist, he singularly combined the broad gaze of a cultural thinker with the expert eye of a trained musician. Despite the inevitable idiosyncrasies, we know in music precisely where Adorno speaks.

Adorno dropped hints of a great music existing outside the realm of the classical altogether, somewhere out in the wailing jungle of the popular
Three recently translated books from the 1960s—Berg: Master of the Smallest Link, Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy, and Quasi una Fantasia—show Adorno in a surprising light. They are not strained sociological schematizations of music history, but portraits of composers in action; they concentrate on compositional “tone,” accents of voice in which individuality evolves from general language. One section of Quasi una Fantasia is given the title “Evocations”: what is evoked is not only the lost past, but also the possible future, possible paths through the ever-burgeoning and ever-diversifying culture of the same. Seeing the limitations of the classical culture to which he was tied, Adorno dropped hints of a great music existing outside the realm of the classical altogether, somewhere out in the wailing jungle of the popular. He ends up offering us a way beyond the destructive distinction between “high” and “low.” But to reach this conclusion requires patience, and, admittedly, a certain amount of imaginative reading.

* * *

Adorno was born to well-to-do bourgeois parents in Frankfurt am Main, toward the end of the Wilhelmine era. His childhood was comfortable; he was coddled for the life of the mind. All his life he remained a noted dandy, a fancier of the better things. He was an excellent dancer. But he did not listen to music in order to relax. Listening, for him, was an active, risky, difficult endeavor. His metaphoric accounts of music’s effects are fraught with odd, disturbing images. Take the description of the opening of Mahler’s Symphony No. 1: “An unpleasant whistling sound like that emitted by old-fashioned steam engines. A thin curtain, threadbare but densely woven, it hangs from the sky like a pale gray cloud layer.” Adorno’s books on Gustav Mahler and Alban Berg, written at a time when neither composer had fully entered into the company of the Great Composers, play down their links to tradition; indeed, they stress those aspects of the music that go against the grain of classical tradition, or at least tradition’s modern-day aspect.

In the chapter on Mahlerian tone, Adorno describes how a multiplicity of musical languages is absorbed into the composer’s individual dialect. Alert to quotations and allusions, he details each element of the general Mahlerian chaos: “His symphonies flaunt shamelessly what rang in all ears, scraps of melody from great music, shallow popular songs, street ballads, hits.” He insists that the critic who once charged Mahler with producing “gigantic symphonic potpourris” was right on the mark. The argument culminates in the following passage:

**Jacobinically the lower music intrudes into the higher. The complacent gloss of the intermediate form is demolished by the inordinate clamor from the military bandstands and palm court orchestras. . . . The surfrisen lower is stirred as yeast into high music. The rude vigor and immediacy of a musical entity that can neither be replaced nor forgotten: the power of naming is often better protected in kitsch and vulgar music than in high music that even before the age of radical construction had sacrificed all that to the principle of stylization. This power is mobilized in Mahler. Free as only one can be who has not himself been entirely swallowed by culture, in his musical vagrancy he picks up the broken glass by the
of the musical objective world, a living totality can arise.” Mahler cast a deep shadow over all composers of the last hundred years because he asked that one tremendous question and then dared to answer it. The “living totality” of his music, personal yet universal, fragmentary yet complete, has found precious few parallels in twentieth-century history. The irony now is that composers have taken to imitating Mahler directly; swooping string lines, ominous marches, and skewy waltz satires have all become familiar devices. But skewy waltzes no longer hold any news, since the waltz is now too rarefied to serve as a popular model. Others have tried to update the Mahlerian project with contemporary popular materials, trying to reconcile a jazz or rock or funk element with pre-existing classical forms. They run the risk of exploitatively appropriating pop genres that have well-developed traditions of their own.

Seeing all of these problems from afar, Adorno paid no serious attention to post-Mahlerian symphonists and allied himself instead with the atonal modernism of the Second Viennese School, which had forsaken Mahler’s baton-ground of the cultural middle and entrenched itself in the new space of the musical avant-garde. Most notably, he spent much ink early in his career defending Arnold Schoenberg, who considered himself Mahler’s heir but who was in most ways as un-Mahlerian a composer as could be imagined. When Adorno took an interest in the European avant-garde movement led by Boulez and Stockhausen in later years, he appeared to endorse music that absorbed the question of style altogether.

The translation is awkward, but the force of the thought comes through. Mahler arrays his ragged symphonic army against the dead mass of tradition, against the teeming trivialities of the present, and against a fast-approaching entity identified as “the age of radical construction” — this is, essentially, the dogma of modernism to come. Uniformed, untamed things, out of childhood and dreams, march in the vanguard. The symphonist’s final sympathy lies with the “social outcast,” the solitary voice lost amid the whole.

Mahler was not, ultimately, a radical; his disorder appears within a larger order. The “Tone” chapter ends with a sentence that renders all other writing on the composer superfluous: “Each Mahlerian symphony asks how, from the ruins

roadside and holds it up to the sun so that all the colors are refected.
and replaced it with an aesthetic of pure extremity and difficulty. There was, however, one great exception. He never wavered in his admiration for the music of Alban Berg, who made an obvious and direct extension of Mahler's method. What Adorno hears in Mahler he also hears in Berg; the mining of the past, the elevation of the banal, the arches built across the disparate.

To reach Berg, however, we must first get around the always troublesome figure of Schoenberg, whose link to Adorno (and to anyone else, for that matter) is prone to gross simplification. The oft-repeated epithet identifying Adorno as a “defender of Schoenberg” deserves to be retired. Certainly, Schoenberg played an enormous role in Adorno’s musical thought; the mountainous dissonances of post-Mahlerian Viennese modernism (1909–22) definitively illustrated the philosophical imperative of resistance, difficulty, desperate freedom. They fulfilled what Adorno memorably called the “inherent tendency within the musical material”—the continual and irrevocable erosion of the harmonic system that reached its crisis with Mahler. Schoenberg completed the process, and perhaps the task of music itself: “Modern music seeks absolute oblivion as its goal. It is the surviving message of despair from the shipwrecked.”

Yet a book like The Philosophy of Modern Music, for many years the only major musical text by Adorno available in English, shows a profound skepticism about the full sweep of Schoenberg’s Ahab-like course. Schoenberg was not only the faithful adherent of a historical process, but also the victim of it. Having discovered the unknown plateau of total harmonic freedom, he became unsure of his footing. The free atonality of Erwartung, a direct extension of the Mahlerian late Romanticism of Pelleas und Melisande, gave way to the edgy formalism of later twelve-tone works. Eventually, the revolutionary—despite himself—eventually made a few hesitant retreats to tonal ground, with dodecaphony still dictating his movements. His longing for order brought music onto the shoals of mathematics, and worse yet of invented dogma. Adorno saw in all this the guilty return of burghery ordinariness; the aesthetic criminal called the police on himself. And it could not have happened any other way: “Twelve-tone music is truly the fate of music.”

To echo Schoenberg’s own critique of John Cage, the composer became a mere inventor. Schoenberg was the better composer and the lesser inventor. The twelve-tone notion led not only to technical disasters, to gray music in empty halls, but to a historical collapse that horribly paralleled the larger cultural tendencies the composers were supposed to resist. Even in 1940, Adorno noted how “progressive” music depended helplessly on support from patrons, foundations, universities, and other clammy institutions; it chained itself to “absolute intellectualization,” to a “blind existence.” The method itself became a sort of astrological chart for composers lost in the cosmos of the new. A further indignity arrived later in the century: dissonance in new music became a universal cliché in film scores, a monochrome signal of terror and sci-fi strangeness. As Adorno scathingly noted, the Schoenberg who pinpointed the ethereal abstraction of Stefan George’s “I feel the air of other
planets” in his Second Quartet found himself glossing the piece decades later as a prophecy of space travel.

The Schoenberg case obsessed Adorno because it embodied, in passing phases, the triumph and the failure of the new music. With these later works on Mahler and Berg, it becomes clear that Adorno saw another way through the musical landscape of his time: beside the straight path of historical necessity, Schoenberg’s doomed lunge for new sound, there was a more obscure route that went forward sometimes by going back, that registered resistance by subverting stylistic elements already in circulation—“expressing the truly unprecedented with a traditional vocabulary,” as Adorno put it in the Mahler book; what he called “music built out of ruins” in an essay on Stravinsky. Only later did he formulate his precise regard for Berg, for several decades considered the regressive and out-of-date member of the Second Viennese School. In the terms of aesthetic value that Adorno developed toward the end of his life, amid the bleak meanderings of the fifties and sixties avant-garde, Berg belatedly arrived as the paragon of twentieth-century modernism.

Berg’s musical ruins were organic. They were not the dancing skeletons of neoclassicism, nor the unidentifiable bone-shards collected by Anton Webern, but chunks of musical history transplanted into the modernist organism. Even when he applied the twelve-tone method with some degree of thoroughness, as in the Lyric Suite and the unfinished opera Lulu, Berg preserved the unrestrained freedom of atonality’s initial period. Moreover, he left his textures open to a wide range of sounds and influences. The conductor Jascha Horen-
stein once remarked that Schoenberg and his circle were all Viennese provincials to the core, with the notable exception of Berg. Suave and remote, excluding a cosmopolitan lenguor that reminded many observers of Oscar Wilde, Berg took an interest in everything that crossed his path, from Puccini to Sibelius to jazz. He was the first to apply the new Schoenbergian language to extended forms, but in so doing he refused to give up the tonal centers that Schoenberg planned to abolish.

Among the musical values left behind by the previous century, Berg sampled those things that seemed most dated: ambiguous progressions of middle Romantics like Schumann and Liszt, the heaving orchestration of the New German school, Mahler’s mournful pulse. The most famous instance is the grand orchestral interlude just before the end of *Wozzeck*, that sudden explosion of plush, semi-Puccinian music that Adorno characterizes as *Der Dichter spricht*, “The Poet Speaks” (a Schumann title). Through this exercise in Romantic nostalgia, which for many decades cost him the support of the avant-garde, Berg performed the most amazing feat of all: holding on to the audience that abandoned Schoenberg and all who followed him. Adorno does not endorse accessibility per se, of course, but he tacitly signals its importance by noting the sensuous, enrapturing, sheerly gorgeous quality of Berg’s sound; and perhaps also in highlighting, as with Mahler, his sympathy for the outcast.

The other side of Berg’s achievement is his vulnerability to the present, and to the possible future. He faced the challenge of the high–low gulf and incorpo-
“The question of specific relevance to Berg is how it can be possible for an act of constant yielding, listening, a gesture of gliding, of not asserting himself, to culminate in something like a large-scale form.” The best example of this process is the March from the Three Pieces for Orchestra, which begins with murmuring and ends in detonation.

Quasi una Fantasia, a late collection of essays lucidly and lyrically translated by Rodney Livingstone, marks the outer limits of Adorno’s horizons. It gathers bewitching satiric fragments from early in Adorno’s career—“Commodity Music Analyzed,” a grimly hilarious under-

taking in which signs of dialectic doom are discovered in the Dvorak Humoresque, Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in C-Sharp Minor, Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony, and the Mozart sonatina that became a novelty pop hit in the thirties; and “Natural History of the Theater,” a spatial sociology of the German opera house in which the rigid class codes and ritualistic gestures of a high-culture mob are neatly skewered. (In the same spirit he elsewhere aimed sharp jibes at Arturo Toscanini, who achieved mass popularity in the 1930s and 1940s with his broadcast performances of the Viennese classics on NBC radio.)

At the heart of Quasi una Fantasia is a weird essay in homage to Franz Schreker, the nonradical Viennese composer of heavily scented fin de siècle operatic farragoes, the purveyor of outmoded Wagnerian impressionism. Adorno takes a guiltless pleasure in Schreker’s self-conscious decadence and art nouveau style. Even while confessing it as a lingering enthusiasm from his teenage years, he argues an opera like Der ferne Klang shows a fabulous richness of orchestral invention, its diaphanous sound becoming an autonomous musical voice. As with Berg, regression and innovation are densely interwoven, hovering in a stylistic never-land—“music that puts down roots in mid-air.” And Adorno then delivers another surprising announcement on the subject of the high-low divide, parallel to the “Jacobin” passage in the Mahler book:

The sharp dichotomy between highbrow and lowbrow music has been erected by the administrators of musical culture into a fetish
which neither side may question. In consequence the guardians of highbrow music are shy of sounds that have found a home in lowbrow music and might discredit the lucrative sanctity of the highbrow variety, while the fanatical supporters of lowbrow music wax indignant at the mere suggestion that their music could have claims as art.

A fondness for Schreker led Adorno to admit the unthinkable—not only that high culture might have brought itself to the brink of bankruptcy, but that some substantial wealth might be hidden on the other side of the divide. He would never indicate, of course, what “lowbrow music” might have “claims as art,” but the ethics of his musical thinking forced him to allow the possibility.

It is no coincidence that the celebration of the messy, the kitschy, and the semi-tonal in Mahler, Zemlinsky, Schreker, and Berg came well after each composer had died. Whenever Adorno addressed the living music of his day, armor snapped in place; his pronouncements took a cautious, political character, as in the propagandistic *Philosophy*. Among contemporary composers he conspicuously endorsed those who appealed to him first and foremost on an intellectual level, those whose rhetoric he could echo with confidence—first Schoenberg, later Stockhausen and Boulez. He was more wary of praising composers simply on the basis of visceral identification with their sound. He dismissed out of hand composers such as Richard Strauss, Britten, and Shostakovich, each of whom paralleled or echoed significant strands of his Mahlerian-Bergian worldview. His views on the subject of Stravinsky are a mess of prejudice and paradox, although the essay in *Quasi una Fantasia* makes more sense than the Stravinsky section of the *Philosophy*.

The remarkable, frustrating final essay of *Quasi una Fantasia* is entitled “*Vers une musique informelle*”—“Toward an Informal Music.” It makes gestures of moving past Schoenbergian pieties, discarding the template of process: “I have never understood the so-called need for order… It is illuminating that after the collapse of the tonal schemata… music should stand in need of organizing powers so as not to lapse into chaos. But the fear of chaos is excessive, in music as in social psychology. It results in the same short-circuiting as is found in the schools of neo-Classicism and twelve-note technique, which in this respect are not all that far apart from each other.” Postwar experiments with chance, inaugurated by John Cage, promise a revolutionary new state of possibility; but Adorno finds chance-controlled music to be just as numbingly systematic as twelve-tone music, and no more intriguing to the objective ear. In their place, Adorno trumpets “informal music,” free of a “false reliance on both an alien necessity and an alien chance.” These are stirring words. One leans forward, anticipating parameters of the new sound, or citations of its use—but the essay (and the book) comes screeching to a halt.

But we can add something to this incomplete manifesto if we read between the lines of *Doktor Faustus*, the story of a German composer who makes a pact with the Devil and writes increasingly difficult music as his nation sinks into Nazi madness. Despite the simplistic na-
ture of Mann’s scheme, Adorno enthusiastically embraced his role as “musical adviser” to the novel. He not only supplied Mann with background details of the twelve-tone method, which the fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn is said to have invented (Schoenberg threw a tantrum when the novel came out), but he also affected the thematic and stylistic substance of the book. Adorno’s voice enters as Mann inserts long quotations from The Philosophy of Modern Music into the dialogue between the composer and the Devil; it also colors descriptions of individual works. The rigorously detailed and completely plausible Leverkühn output follows the whole Adornian sweep of modernist musical development, including music that in the late 1940s had yet to be composed.

The most extreme of the Leverkühn works is the Apocalypse Oratorio, for which Mann needed “specific detail”—“what sort of music,” he wrote to Adorno, “would [you] write if you were in league with the devil?” What emerged was a musical fabric incorporating “barbarism” and “bloodless intellectuality,” glissandi and volleys of percussion, howling and shrieking choruses that accompany the opening of the seventh seal, “graded whisperings, antiphonal speech,” and, most strikingly, an incongruous blend of styles high and low—“a gennan gaudium, sweeping through fifty bars, beginning with the chuckle of a single voice and rapidly gaining ground, embracing choir and orchestra, frightfully swelling in rhythmic upheavals and contrary motions to a fortissimo tutti, an overwhelming, sardonically yelling . . .” (It goes on.) This is music that combines elements of the interwar avant-garde, the postwar avant-garde, and a sort of metamusical that had not even been conceived—and that would only arrive twenty years later, in the music of Bernd Alois Zimmermann, Luciano Berio, William Bolcom, and most especially Alfred Schnittke, for whom the novel has been a direct inspiration.

In his final work, The Lamentation of Dr. Faustus, Leverkühn journeys further into “a free language of feeling,” a “reconstruction of expressiveness,” one final “breakthrough.” A parodic element persists in the “grand-ballet music” of Faust’s descent into hell, but the piece is dominated by a tone of serene lamentation—“repetitions, . . . the lingering out of syllables, falling intervals, dying-away declamations.” It balances bleakness and hope, standstill and hovering redemption; it revokes Beethovenian joy but rediscovers lyric expressivity. The final measures are described as follows: “One group of instruments after another retires, and what remains, as the work fades on the air, is the high G of a cello, the last word, the last fainting sound, slowly dying in a pianissimo fermata . . . but that tone which vibrates in the silence, which is no longer there, to which only the spirit hearkens, and which was the voice of mourning, is no more. It changes its meaning; it abides as a light in the night.” This famous passage is, in fact, a paraphrase of Adorno’s description of Berg’s Lyric Suite, written several years before the novel and reprinted in Master of the Smallest Link: “One instrument after another falls silent. The viola alone remains, but it is not even allowed to expire, to die. It must play for ever; except that we can no longer hear it.”

Leverkühn came to a bad end: “We
point: music emptyly talking to itself, shuffling through dead archives of style. But the faintly luminous coda of *Lamentation* represents a second hope, a “hope beyond hopelessness.” At a time when all the great composers made gestures of being the last, at a time when an incomprehensible din of commercial art was rising around him, Adorno knew that music would not give in, would play on forever—even if he could not hear it.

... 

Adorno’s best-known work on popular music is the essay “Jazz,” contained in the collection *Prisms*. It was one of the first Adorno works to be widely read in English; with the infamous treatment of the “Culture Industry” in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it has shaped contemporary assumptions of what Adorno thought of postclassical culture. It is some of his worst writing, and some of his most uncharacteristic. What is incensing about his treatment of the subject, besides the racist characterizations of jazz players as jungle animals, is his across-the-board dismissal not merely of extant elements in the field but of all imaginable possibilities, whether past, present, or future. He attacks devotees of “pure” jazz for making what he considers a false distinction between commercial and noncommercial varieties of the same commodity product. Jazz is entirely captive of the total system of commodity culture that he attacks on all fronts, whether in Hollywood, television, or glossy print media, as “uniform as a whole and in every part.”

But it should be made clear exactly what kind of jazz Adorno was talking about. In his far-ranging study of Ador-
Adorno dreamt of what could be, and then explained why not

no, *Late Marxism*, Fredric Jameson has summarized the limits of Adorno’s popular horizons as follows: “The products of Adorno’s Culture Industry must now be identified as standard Hollywood Grade-B genre film (before the latter’s reorganization by *auteur* theory), as radio comedy and serials of a thirties and forties variety (‘Fibber McGee’ and ‘Molly’, for example) and, in music, as Paul Whiteman (the proper referent for what Adorno calls ‘jazz’ which has little to do with the richness of a Black culture we [sic] have only long since then discovered); it has something to do with Toscanini as well . . . and arguably also anticipates the first television programs of the late 1940s (such as Milton Berle).” He concludes: “The ‘Culture Industry’ is not a theory of culture but the theory of an *industry*, of a branch of the interlocking monopolies of late capitalism that makes money out of what used to be called culture.” So Adorno’s hostility was directed not so much at a particular kind of music as at its commercial system of distribution, to which both high and low could fall victim.

Similarly, in a lucid new study entitled *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music*, Max Paddison highlights the following passage in Adorno’s *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*: “The social function of jazz coincides with its history, the history of a heresy that has been received into the mass culture. Certainly, jazz has the potential of a musical breakout from this culture on the part of those who were either refused admittance to it or annoyed by its mendacity. Time and again, however, jazz became a captive of the culture industry and thus of musical and social conformism. . . .” Paddison observes that this passage “shows Adorno for once applying his own dialectical principles with admirable rigor to a music he clearly dislikes.” Far from attacking jazz’s African American origins as an instance of quasi-musical barbarism, Adorno was annoyed precisely by the facile appropriation of the “African” by white culture. What he disliked most in popular music was the *illusion* of barbarism, the manufactured whiff of the primitive—the *faux-sauvage* tone he heard as early as Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*.

How far off was he, in the long view? One need not insult the intelligence of individual consumers to concur that the American lowest-common-denominator process of cultural selection erodes creative individuality. With a sympathetic ear, one can argue further that popular music is a general field of mediocrity in the way that classical music has always been a general field of mediocrity. (For every Beethoven there are a hundred Boccherinis.) Within such fields, to a greater or lesser degree, the passionate protest of convention persists. Adorno did not recognize the resistant note that bebop and free jazz sounded in a complacent postwar culture, but sound it did. Here was music free of constraints, yet monastically severe, an ecstasy of dissonance. Cecil Taylor’s coruscating piano is the sound that the classical avant-garde dreams fitfully at night. Read “Vers une musique informelle” in this light, and it becomes an eloquent manifesto for the entire achievement of free jazz. It is worth noting that this art does not subsist merely on a fetishistic pursuit of the new; like Berg, it also partakes of nostalgia, as when the sonorities produced by Taylor’s larger ensembles wheel back toward an Elling-
Theodor Adorno
with mother and
aunt

Schiller nationalmuseum,
Marburg, Germany
ton sound, or when David S. Ware rings variations on “Autumn Leaves.” In Austria, Franz Koglmann has produced jazz scores that achieve an uncanny synthesis of Anton Webern and swing.

It might also be argued, however provisionally, that certain isolated zones of rock music have practiced the same refusal of the world that Adorno celebrated in new music. “[Adorno’s] few analyses of popular music,” writes Robert Walser in Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music, “are so vague, vitriolic, and transparently racist that one wishes he had limited the scope of his analytical attentions even more than he did. So for those working in the area of popular music, the need to recoup that music from Adorno’s damning criticism has taken precedence over the possibilities of adapting his methods to other ends.” Greil Marcus, in Lipstick Traces, daringly specifies those other ends: “Probably no definition of punk can be stretched far enough to enclose Theodor Adorno. As a music lover he hated jazz, likely retchet when he heard Elvis Presley, and no doubt would have understood the Sex Pistols as a return to Kristallnacht if he hadn’t been lucky enough to die in 1969. But you can find punk between every line of Minima Moralia: its miasmic loathing for what Western civilization had made itself by the end of the Second World War was, by 1977, the stuff of a hundred songs and slogans.”

This claim is not quite so ridiculous as it might seem on first glance. The various art-school students and college dropouts who headed many of the first punk bands were often familiar with the general cant of the Frankfurt School, if not with Adorno himself. (“The mass media have homogenized the popular taste in music. . . . There is now a standard sound for all popular music idioms,” writes Joe Carducci in an underground-rock manifesto entitled Rock and the Pop Narcotic. “There are neither mistakes of execution, nor accidents of tone or tonal harmonics between instrumental voices. Every element is harmonized, chorisued and digitally brought to pitch.”) Punk was sometimes advertised as a return to rock’s roots, but more often it was an insistence on a peculiar or parodic vocabulary of its own devising. One can see what Marcus meant about Minima Moralia in a passage such as this:

"Progress and barbarism are today so matted together in mass culture that only barbaric asceticism towards the latter, and towards progress in technical means, could restore an unbarbarian condition. No work of art, no thought, has a chance of survival, unless it bear within it repudiation of false riches and high-class production, of color films and television, millionaire’s magazines and Toscanini.

The older media, not designed for mass-production, take on a new timeliness: that of exemption and of improvisation. They alone could outflank the united front of trusts and technology. In a world where books have long lost all likeness to books, the real book can no longer be one. If the invention of the printing press inaugurated the bourgeois era, the time is at hand for its repeal by the mimeograph, the only fitting, the unobtrusive means of dissemination.

Here, if one squints, one can see a rough map of the world of 1970s and 1980s underground rock, in which music was improvised in suburban garages, cultivated by inquisitive small labels, printed on out-
dated 7-inch singles, and marketed with xeroxed fliers and fanzines, all outside the reach (at least for a few years) of major musical corporations. Whether Adorno would have retched to hear the result is beside the point; he codified a mode of musical resistance that has spontaneously replicated itself through the decades.

Noise, as the enemy of perfectly engineered pop products, has become a last refuge of social protest in music. Political messages in pop lyrics are all too easily manipulated and reversed: witness the myriad nonsubversive uses to which Brecht and Weill’s “Mack the Knife” has been put, or the rapid dissipation of sixties radical ideals in the pop counterculture. But the vague, unsettling rawness of punk and postpunk music has never been completely absorbed, and a few bands have maintained their careers while declining the enticements of commercial production. If many others simply faded from view as the decade of the eighties wore on, the dumb power of noise surfaced in other contexts. “Bring the Noise,” Public Enemy enjoined on their second album; rap’s thick, discordant, splintered, buzzing texture surfaced from another spontaneous network of independent record labels. The turntable, a technology already well on the way out of fashion, was mobilized for its musical possibilities. Modern styles of rave, dub, and techno exist in a spacetout, continuous, noise-saturated world beyond the grasp of formal definition. Every decade, *Minima Moralia* finds fresh unconscious fulfillment—however short-lived, however misguided.

All this goes to demonstrate, I think, a certain cryptic youthfulness in Adorno’s writing. He has come down to posterity as a curmudgeon, but *Quasi una Fantasia* and other books have an undertow of unforgotten adolescent discontent. No one else would have dared to praise Franz Schreker for his “incorrigible immaturity” or Erik Satie for his “perv and puerile piano pieces,” and no one else could have written this epitaph for Berg: “He successfully avoided becoming an adult without remaining infantile.” Adorno was never fully adult himself. In a magnificent passage in “Commodity Music Analyzed,” some 1930s pop lyrics are quoted—“Hear their two hearts softly beat, / one moment more and their lips will meet. / What a sweet and charming picture, / love in glory, love in bloom, / don’t you wish that we were in an eighteenth-century drawing room?”—and
then answered: “No.” It has the vehemence of a disgruntled teenager running up to his room and slamming the door.

Adorno’s punkish, devilish negations are still needlesome to the culture of idiotic savoir-faire. They are the spiky fantasies of an unreconstructed aesthete, imagining “paradigms of a possible music” in Schoenberg and conveying “unheard melodies” through the medium of Mann. The possible went underground as the improbable; Adorno dreamt of what could be, and then explained why not. His possible or ideal music had deep, unbreakable, constraining relations with the past. But this was all of a piece with his peculiar realism, his appraisal of music’s outcast status in an unlistening world. His true poetic counterpart was Wallace Stevens’s aesthete of evil, writing paragraphs on the sublime under the shadow of Vesuvius: “Under every no / lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.”