

Adorno: New Approaches To The Concept Of Musical Material

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ABSTRACT :- The thought of Theodor W. Adorno has profoundly shaped our understanding of modern music, framing the critical relationship between the composer and tradition. Yet within this theoretical landscape, a crucial dimension has remained unexplored: the intimate juncture at which the weight of musical history crystallizes into a moment of personal clarity and decisive artistic expression.

This article identifies and examines this hidden link—a transformative process through which historical materials are reconfigured and directed toward the realization of the musical work. We conceptualize this pivotal mechanism as the *Epiphany*: a moment of convergence in which the composer’s identity, the work’s structural logic, and its fundamental purpose are simultaneously and irrevocably revealed through engagement with the material.

The Epiphany marks a critical shift—from the use of inherited material to its active appropriation, converting historical givens into personal necessity and propelling them toward what Adorno termed the *Warheitsgehalt* (truth-content) of the work. It is precisely through such subjective revelation that the musical work acquires objective, universal resonance.

We argue that this moment is not incidental but foundational—generating what Kant described as the “subjective universality” of the artwork. Ultimately, our hypothesis seeks not only to address a theoretical gap in Adorno’s framework but to re-illuminate the very mystery of artistic creation.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this article, we continue our research on the impact of Theodor W. Adorno’s thought on the process of musical creation.¹ We present what may be considered a missing piece in his conception of musical material: the *Epiphany*. This concept will serve both to explain the transition from historical musical materials to the composer’s appropriation of them, and to shed light on the evolution of those materials toward the realization of what Adorno calls the “truth content” of the resulting work. Moreover, the Epiphany would be—this being a central hypothesis of the article—the origin of the subjective universality of the work, which is not external to its process of gestation but rather an inherent component within it.

The two meanings of the concept of musical material: historicity and creative process

Adorno’s concept of musical material presents a terminological difficulty that should be clarified at the outset. According to Anne Boissière, “the material designates the stage of the technique of a given period, that is, the set of compositional problems that define a particular era [...]”.² On the other hand, “the material

¹ « Adorno and avant-garde music », International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis (IJMRA) Volume 4 Issue 3 – March 2021

<http://ijmra.in/v4i3/10.php>

« Adorno, ou la discussion qui n’a pas eu lieu », in *Musique, instruments, machines – autour des musiques électroacoustiques*. Textes réunis et édités par B. Bossis, A. Veitl et M. Battier, Actes du séminaire du MINT ? Université Paris IV, Sorbonne, 2007.

<https://www.motsetimages.fr/livre/320204-musique-instruments-machines-autour-des-musi--groupe-musicologie-informatique-et-nouvelles-t--musicologie-informatique-et-nouvelles-technolo>

² « [...], le matériau désigne le stade de la technique d’une époque, c’est-à-dire l’ensemble des problèmes compositionnels qui définissent une époque déterminée [...] ». »

Anne BOISSIÈRE, *Adorno, la vérité de la musique moderne*, Villeneuve d’Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1999, p. 77.

designates that to which form is given in composition, that to which the compositional gesture is applied and which is essentially relative to it [...]”.³

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes:

“Material is what artists have at their disposal: what is presented to them in words, colours, and sounds, up to associations of all kinds, up to the various technical processes developed; in this respect, forms can also become material; that is, what is presented to them and about which they must decide.”⁴

Thus, on the one hand, there is the material as it is perceived, as it appears, and on the other, the repercussions this material will have in the chain of possible associations imagined by the creator. The difference lies in the mediation of the artist’s compositional activity, which has not yet taken place in the first case but is set in motion in the second.

From this observation it follows that anything can become material, provided it is subjected to the compositional process. We shall call *neutral* the material considered without taking into account the artist’s mediation. It is historical; it represents a given period and its circumstances. This is the sense of the term when Adorno says:

“Material can only be conceived as that with which the composer operates and works. In this sense, it is nothing other than, objectified and critically reflected, the state of the technical productive forces with which composers are confronted in a given epoch.”⁵

We shall call *polarized* the material used in the process of composition. It is from this that the composer moves toward the realization of his work.

II. THE EPIPHANY: THE INITIAL MOMENT OF THE WORK

But what produces the passage between neutral and polarized materials in the creation of a work? This question, which Adorno does not formulate, is nevertheless fundamental to understanding the creative process in all its complexity. This moment, in which the composer appropriates historical materials in the course of realizing his work, we shall call *Epiphany*. How does it occur?

Prior to it there has been a time of experimentation—a period of preparatory research in which the composer works with historical material. It is necessary for the composer to investigate the musical material inherited from tradition in order ultimately to inhabit it, to make it his own. In this first period of research, subject and object are clearly delineated. The creator’s knowledge of the materials with which he works (and, as Adorno says, against which he contends) is objective; its representation is conceptual and limited to the time of investigation.

Through successive experimentation with the material, the composer experiences an illumination: suddenly, he no longer finds himself equally equidistant from all the materials he has been working with. He feels some of them, appropriates them, and consequently rejects the others. A moment of spontaneous selection has just occurred: the Epiphany. Thanks to it, the composer now knows which elements he will work with, senses what his work will be, and envisions—though still vaguely—the steps to follow in order to complete it. As a consequence of this spontaneously revealed feeling, materials and creator become an indivisible unity; that is, it is now impossible to maintain a clear distinction between subject and object, since the composer is inhabiting the material that presents itself to him—a necessity he can no longer postpone. The two are one. Here arises the difference between the conceptual knowledge the creator may have had of the historical materials and the embodied knowledge—that is, knowledge enacted through the entirety of his body—of the materials he feels as the origin of his nascent work. This process manifests itself as a movement of attraction toward the polarized materials with which the creator identifies, and of repulsion toward those he does not and

³ « [...] le matériau désigne ce qui est mis en forme dans la composition, ce sur quoi s’exerce le geste compositionnel et qui lui est essentiellement relatif [...] ».

Anne BOISSIÈRE, *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴ « Le matériau, c’est ce dont disposent les artistes : ce qui se présente à eux en paroles, en couleurs et en sons, jusqu’aux associations de toutes sortes, jusqu’aux différents procédés techniques développés ; dans cette mesure, les formes peuvent également devenir matériau ; c’est-à-dire ce qui se présente à elles et dont elles ont à décider. »

Theodor W. ADORNO, *Théorie esthétique*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1995, new edition, French translation by Marc Jiménez, p. 209.

⁵ « Le matériau ne peut être conçu que comme ce avec quoi le compositeur opère et travaille. En ce sens, il n’est rien moins que, objectivé et réfléchi de façon critique, l’état des forces de production techniques auquel les compositeurs sont confrontés à une époque donnée. »

Theodor W. ADORNO, « Vers une musique informelle », in *Quasi una fantasia*, French translation by Jean-Louis Leleu, Ole Hansen-Løve and Philippe Joubert, Paris, Gallimard, 1982, p. 302.

consequently discards. In other words, embodied knowledge cannot be conceived in terms of fixed concepts or immutable initial values, for creation has set a dynamic in motion. As Adorno aptly states:

“Art can be interpreted only by the law of its movement, not by invariants.”⁶

In his work *The Sense of Sense*, the psychologist Irwin Straus differentiates between the *pathic* moment—where embodied knowledge manifests itself, rooted in processes in movement—and the *gnosic* moment—where conceptual knowledge, dependent on language, predominates. The originality of his point of view lies in conceiving feeling as a concept rooted in bodily movement. Thus, just as we move from one point to another, feeling manifests itself as a kind of movement, an impulse to join or to separate, a sort of attraction or repulsion toward people, environments, and things.

“The being who feels lives in the world and is destined, as part of it, to unite with certain parts of the world or to separate from them. Every act of separation or union is already, in the order of immanence, a being-mobile, or rather, a being-in-movement. Consequently, movement and feeling are bound together by an intimate relation that must be described and understood. The theory of sensation and the theory of movement cannot be treated separately, for if we do so we also separate the processes of sensation from those of movement. Their relation is broken, and we must inevitably renounce re-establishing it.”⁷

When we feel, our being becomes inseparable from the knowledge that accompanies that feeling, whereas in knowing, conceptual thought is immobile and clearly separates subject and object. The creator has the possibility of passing from the pathic to the gnosic moment quite naturally. This passage is necessary, because the Epiphany allows him to sense the path to follow; but to specify it, it is necessary to objectify the work, determining its elements, its repertory of actions and instruments, its form, its development, its parts, and so forth.

The circulation between feeling and knowing: a key to artistic creation

“We maintain, with Merleau-Ponty, that Western scientific culture requires us to see our bodies not only as physical structures but as lived and experiential structures—that is, as both ‘external’ and ‘internal,’ biological and phenomenological. It is obvious that both aspects of corporeality do not oppose each other; rather, we continuously circulate from one aspect to the other. Merleau-Ponty understood that we cannot comprehend this circulation without a detailed investigation of its fundamental axis, namely, the corporeality of knowledge, cognition, and experience. For Merleau-Ponty, then, as for us, corporeality has this double meaning: it encompasses the body as lived experiential structure and the body as the context or field of cognitive mechanisms.”⁸

In the same sense, Morin describes the subject–object circularity in the following terms:

“There is only an object in relation to a subject (who observes, isolates, defines, thinks), and there is only a subject in relation to an objective environment, which co-constitutes him in his own inner being, allows him to exist, to recognize, define, and think himself. The object and the subject, each on its own, are insufficient concepts. The idea of the pure object is a useful reification, not a correct representation of reality. [...] Thus, just as the notion of objectivity can only be subjective, the notion of subjectivity can only be objective; in other words, there exists a circuit, an uninterrupted rotation between the two terms of subject and object.”⁹

⁶ « L’art ne peut être interprété que par la loi de son mouvement, non par des invariants. »

Theodor W. ADORNO, *Théorie esthétique*, op. cit., p. 18.

⁷ « L’être sentant vit dans le monde et est voué, comme partie de ce monde, à s’unir à certaines autres parties de ce monde ou à se séparer de celles-ci. Toute acte de séparation ou d’union est déjà, à l’ordre de l’immanence, un être-mû, mieux, un être-en-mouvement. En conséquence le mouvement et la sensation sont liés l’un à l’autre par une relation intime qu’il importe de décrire et de comprendre. On ne saurait traiter séparément la théorie de la sensation et la théorie du mouvement, car ce faisant, on sépare aussi les processus de sensation de ceux du mouvement, leur relation se trouve perturbée et il faut renoncer à la restaurer. »

Erwin STRAUS, *Du sens des sens – Contribution à l’étude des fondements de la psychologie (The Meaning of the Senses – Contribution to the Study of the Foundations of Psychology)* French translation by G. Thines et J.-P. Legrand, Paris : Editions Jérôme Million, 2000 for the French translation, p. 235.

⁸ Francisco VARELA, Evan THOMPSON and Eleanor ROSCH, *The embodied Mind. Cognitive Science and Human Experience (De cuerpo presente, Las ciencias cognitivas y la experiencia humana)* Spanish translation by Carlos Gardini. Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 1992, pgs. 18 y 19.

⁹ « Il n’y a d’objet que par rapport à un sujet (qui observe, isole, définit, pense) et il n’y a de sujet que par rapport à un environnement objectif, qui le co-constitue dans son être interne même, qui lui permet d’exister, qui lui permet de se reconnaître, de se définir, de se penser. L’objet et le sujet, chacun livré à lui-même, son des concepts insuffisants. L’idée d’objet pur est une réification utile, non pas une représentation correcte du réel. [...] Ainsi, de même que la notion d’objectivité ne peut être que subjective, la notion de subjectivité ne peut pas

Applied to the process of musical creation, the creator's intuition must be complemented by knowledge, so that what originally constitutes pure feeling, determined only confusedly or statistically, may be transformed into a defined repertory of instruments, actions, and principles. But this knowledge is not that of the materials in their pre-Epiphanic experimentation phase; now knowledge focuses on the development of enacted materials, serving the composition already underway.

The "Content of Truth" and the Progress of the Materials

In its polarized sense, the material is then an integral part of the creative process and acquires meaning when related to what it will be when the work is finished and, in Adorno's terminology, to its "content of truth" (Wahrheitsgehalt). The still unreal character of the "content of truth" is expressed in *absentia* by the material, in a metaphysics of music that seeks to express the inexpressible:

"What transcends the factual in the work of art, its spiritual content, cannot be associated with the particular sensible given, but is constituted by it. In this consists the mediating character of the content of truth."¹⁰

As Raymond Court has pointed out:

"When Adorno describes the "content of truth" of his work as "metaphysical", he means by it a meaning that is never secondary or retrospective, but decidedly non-empirical, prospective, in a word, utopian."¹¹

For Adorno, the work is not a present, but a becoming. Between these two moments lies what he calls *the progress of the material*, that is, all the transformations to which the composer will subject the polarized material to achieve the "content of truth."

III. EPIPHANY AND "CONTENT OF TRUTH"

We have presented the Epiphany, the missing piece in the transition from neutral material to polarized material. It is necessary to add that it not only marks the beginning of the work in gestation; it also indicates, in a confused, statistical manner, what the end of the work will be. Here reappears the old concept of *confused intelligible*, not in the pejorative sense given by the philosophical tradition of Leibniz or Wolff, but in a qualitatively different sense, understood as proper to the activity of artists. Thus understood by the father of modern aesthetics, Alexander Baumgarten, differentiating logical concepts from artistic concepts.

In his analysis of Baumgarten's aesthetics, Jacques Derriculat states:

"Baumgarten thus claims a domain of aesthetic knowledge that has its own criteria of excellence and challenges the hegemony of logical knowledge, the only one recognized so far by the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Poetic invention therefore obeys its own laws, which are not those of mathematical invention."¹²

That is, the Epiphany that transforms the material into something personal, proper to the composer, also projects itself toward the realization of the work. But Adorno's "content of truth" is not only the realization of a musical form, but also the embodiment of the totality of aesthetic, sociological, historical, political, etc., factors that constitute the environment in which the work is produced. Moreover, the work creates its own audience, that is, inherent in it are its future admirers, its performers, its scholars, its analysts. It is here that the "content of truth" and Baumgarten's "heterocosmism" (the artist as creator of worlds) prove to be two concepts of immediate proximity.

être qu'objective ; c'est-à-dire qu'il y a un circuit, une rotation ininterrompue entre les deux termes de sujet et objet [...]. »

Edgar MORIN, *La méthode de la Méthode, le manuscrit perdu*, Actes Sud, Paris, 2024, p. 69 / 71.

¹⁰ « Ce qui dans l'œuvre d'art transcende le factuel, son contenu spirituel, ne peut être associé au donné sensible particulier, mais se constitue par celui-ci. C'est en cela que consiste le caractère médiatisé du contenu de vérité. »

Theodor W. ADORNO., *op.cit.*, p. 184.

¹¹ « Quand Adorno qualifie de "métaphysique" le "contenu de vérité" de son œuvre, il veut désigner par là un sens qui n'est jamais second ni rétrospectif, mais résolument non-empirique, prospectif, en un mot utopique. » Raymond COURT, *Adorno et la nouvelle musique*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1981, p. 6.

¹² « Baumgarten revendique ainsi un domaine propre pour la connaissance esthétique, qui a ses propres critères d'excellence et qui remet en question l'hégémonie de la connaissance logique, seule reconnue jusque-là par la philosophie de l'*Aufklärung*. L'invention poétique obéit donc à ses lois, qui ne sont pas celles de l'invention mathématique. »

Jacques DARRICULAT, « Baumgarten et la fondation de l'esthétique », *Introduction à la philosophie esthétique*, on line in

<http://www.jdarriulat.net/Introductionphiloesth/PhiloModerne/Baumgarten.html>

Epiphany and Subjective Universality

Since the discovery of mirror neurons by Dr. Giacomo Rizzolatti in 1995, we know that an invisible network establishes an emotional connection between humans. What is the operational domain of mirror neurons?

"One of their essential functions is the understanding of action. It may seem strange that to recognize what another does, one has to activate their own motor system. In fact, this is not so surprising. Only visual observation, without the participation of the motor system, provides a separate description of the visible aspects of movement, without informing what the action truly means. This information can only be obtained if the observed action is transcribed into the observer's own motor system. Therefore, the activation of the mirror circuit is essential to provide the observer with a real and experiential understanding of the action they see."¹³

To decipher the sensations and emotions our neighbor feels (pain, fear, pity, drowsiness, well-being, etc.), as well as to decode their intentions and desires, we record this data, both spontaneously and involuntarily, in our own motor system, activating the same neurons.

"In a way, we can say that the neurons in the observer's brain imitate the neurons of the observed person; hence the 'qualitative mirror' (mirror neurons)."¹⁴

In this way, mirror neurons establish an invisible network of connections between humans, the indispensable genetic requirement for all communication to take place.

Building upon this groundbreaking discovery¹⁵, we point out its direct effects on subjective universality, which, from being merely speculative, now acquires experimental contours validating the universal agreement on the aesthetic judgment of beauty defined by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*:

"That which is represented without a concept as an object of universal satisfaction is beautiful."¹⁶

This biological validation of intersubjectivity also explains the inherent ambiguity of individual consciousness, which is one, yet composed of many agents interacting in what we perceive as a unified being:

"Apodictically, as an ego in the present of my horizon, I am the 'I' that has a world in the present as a phenomenon, and this world has its constituted temporal horizon. The explanation – ultimately the explanation of my transcendental present horizon, taken as a whole – leads to other egos, who are transcendently and currently present with me, with their horizons. Here, a universal apodictic structure is indicated in my ego, in each ego in general; an egological intersubjectivity is indicated in each ego, at the heart of its own structure."¹⁷

¹³ « Une de leurs fonctions essentielles est la compréhension de l'action. Il peut paraître bizarre que, pour reconnaître ce que l'autre est en train de faire, on doive activer son propre système moteur. En fait, cela n'est pas tellement surprenant. Car la seule observation visuelle, sans implication du système moteur, ne donne qu'une description des aspects visibles du mouvement, sans informer sur ce que signifie réellement cette action. Cette information ne peut être obtenue que si l'action observée est transcrite dans le système moteur de l'observateur. L'activation du circuit miroir est ainsi essentielle pour donner à l'observateur une compréhension réelle et expérientielle de l'action qu'il voit. »

Giacomo RIZZOLATTI, « Les systèmes de neurones miroirs » online in https://www.academie-sciences.fr/pdf/membre/s121206_rizzolatti.pdf

¹⁴ On peut dire en quelque sorte que les neurones dans le cerveau de celui/celle qui observe imitent les neurones de la personne observée ; de là le qualificatif "miroir" (*mirror neurons*). »

Simon DE KEUKELAERE, « Des découvertes révolutionnaires en sciences cognitives – Les paradoxes et dangers de l'imitation », on line in

<http://www.automatesintelligents.com/labo/2005/mar/neuronesmiroir.html>

¹⁵ For further reading on this topic, see

GIACOMO RIZZOLATTI/ Corrado SINIGAGLIA, *Les neurones miroirs*, French translation by Marlène Raiola, published by Odile Jacob, Paris, 2011 for the French translation.

¹⁶ „Schön ist das, was ohne Begriff allgemein gefällt.“

Immanuel KANT, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, Deutschland, 1957, p. 32.

¹⁷ « Apodictiquement, en tant qu'ego dans le présent de mon horizon, je suis le moi qui a un monde dans le présent comme phénomène, et ce monde a son horizon temporel constitué. L'explication [ultimement l'explication de mon horizon de présent transcendantal, pris en son entier] conduit aux autres ego, qui sont transcendentement et actuellement présents en même temps que moi, avec leurs horizons. Ici est indiquée une structure universelle apodictique dans mon ego, dans tout ego en général ; une intersubjectivité égologique est indiquée dans tout ego, au cœur de sa structure propre. »

Edmund HUSSERL, *Autour des méditations cartésiennes : sur l'intersubjectivité*, French translation by Marc Richir, Éd. Jérôme Millon, 1998, p. 192.

"Transcendental subjectivity is a revealed subjectivity, that is, to itself and to others, and as such, it is an intersubjectivity."¹⁸

"Radical imagination is precisely what this 'we' can never enclose within itself, what flees from all sides, constantly becomes something other than what it 'is', settles in and through the position of the figures and surpasses any given figure. Stupidly assimilated to a supposed immanence for oneself of 'psychological consciousness', the representative flow makes precisely radical imagination appear as immanent transcendence, passage to the other, impossibility for what 'is' to 'be' without making, at the same time, the other 'be' – in short, (radical imagination makes appear, N.B.) the artificial and manufactured character of the opposition of the immanent and the transcendent conceived as secure and absolute."¹⁹

"The relationship with the Thou is immediate. Between the I and the Thou, there is no interposition of any set of concepts, any scheme, and no prior image [...] Any medium is an obstacle. When all media are suppressed, only then does the direct encounter occur."²⁰

"Every individual is one, singular, and irreducible. And yet, at the same time, it is double, plural, unnameable, and diverse. Again, we find here the problem of multiple unity."²¹

What we postulate is that in that moment of revelation, which is the Epiphany, an alignment of the different components of the creator's subjectivity occurs, of which their unconscious, their heritage, their culture, their atavistic drives, and their ancestral heritage are part. The future listeners of the work will also respond to this alignment, inscribing what it produces in their mirror neuron system: and the possibility of this agreement would be, ultimately, the subjective universality we speak of.

IV. THE DIALECTIC OF COMPOSITION

Adorno's dialectic is not a rigid system; on the contrary, it frees itself from the categorical imperatives of Hegel's closed systematic. According to him, the work is a field of contradictory forces that reflects the tensions and contradictions of the historical epoch in which it is created. A lucid critic of orthodox dialectical materialism, together with Horkheimer and other philosophers of the Frankfurt School, Adorno carried out what he called a negative dialectic of composition. Musical creation for him would be an act of negation of music already assimilated by the system (negation of what is conventional, of what has been adapted to popular consciousness by capitalism for commercial ends). Starting from the analysis of Beethoven as an ideal and of the dialectical interplay of his cultural and historical circumstances, Adorno compares in *Philosophy of New Music* the profiles of Schoenberg and Stravinsky.

With Beethoven, Adorno's negative dialectic works in the following way:
Thesis: the musical forms inherited from the classical tradition (sonata, concerto, symphony, etc.)
Antithesis: the individual creative energy, in conflict with neutral material.
Synthesis: Without destroying or supplanting the inherited forms, Beethoven transforms and energizes them. Development is the process by which the classical forms, in conflict with the composer's creativity, reach a higher unity.

Example: the first movement of Symphony No. 3 "Eroica".

In the case of Arnold Schoenberg, the negative dialectic may be diagrammed thus:
Thesis: the hierarchical tonal system based on the tonic/dominant/subdominant poles and their modulations.
Antithesis: the weakening of tonal poles in modulations and increasingly complex chords of late Romantic

¹⁸ « La subjectivité transcendantale est une subjectivité révélée, savoir à elle-même et à autrui, et à ce titre elle est une intersubjectivité. »

Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p. 415.

¹⁹ « L'imagination radicale est précisément ce par quoi ce « nous » ne peut jamais être enfermé en lui-même, ce par quoi il fuit de tous les côtés, se fait constamment comme autre de ce qu'il « est », se pose dans et par la position de figures et dépasse toute figure donnée. Stupidement assimilé à une prétendue immanence à soi de la « conscience psychologique », le flux représentatif fait précisément voir l'imagination radicale comme transcendance immanente, passage à l'autre, impossibilité pour ce qui « est » d' « être » sans faire être l'autre — bref, (l'imagination radicale fait voir, N.B.) le caractère artificiel et fabriqué de l'opposition de l'immanent et le transcendant conçue comme assurée et absolue. [...] ».

Cornelius CASTORIADIS, *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, éditions du Seuil, 1975, p. 482.

²⁰ « La relation avec le Tu est immédiate. Entre le Je et le Tu ne s'interpose aucun jeu de concepts, aucun schéma et aucune image préalable [...] Tout moyen est obstacle. Quand tous les moyens sont abolis, alors seulement se produit la rencontre directe. »

Martin BUBER, *Je et Tu*, translated to French by G. Bianquis, Éditions Aubier, Paris, 1969, p. 30.

²¹ « Tout individu est un, singulier, irréductible. Et pourtant il est en même temps double, pluriel, innombrable et divers. Ici encore, nous retrouvons le problème de l'unité multiple. »

Edgar MORIN, *La méthode*, 5., « L'humanité de l'humanité », Éditions du Seuil, 2001, p. 89.

music (Wagner, Mahler, Bruckner, Strauss). The necessity of a new musical language in accord with a society in crisis becomes visible.

Synthesis: 1) Free atonality (1908–1923). Rejection of the hierarchy of pitch determined by tonal poles; consequent equality of all pitches among themselves. Placing harmony in a secondary role as structuring parameter of composition, musical form emerges from varied contrapuntal motives, timbral associations and instrumental texture. The individual search for expression imposes from within the musical form of the work, abandoning externally pre-established schemes. Example: *Pierrot Lunaire* op. 21 (1912) by Schoenberg, for soprano and ensemble, using poems by André Gide. German translation by Otto Hartleben. 2) Twelve-tone technique (from 1923 onward). It is the method that allows organizing the pitches of the work by means of a series constituted by the twelve sounds of the chromatic scale, using four modes of combinatorial variation. The other parameters of the work, though composed intuitively, accompany this organization. Twelve-tone replaces tonality as principle of construction.

Focusing mainly on Stravinsky's neoclassical period, Adorno analyses what he calls regressive dialectic or *pseudomorphosis*.

Thesis: we return to the situation of the Romantic creator confronted with the crisis of tonality.

Antithesis: Stravinsky does not move dialectically toward the creation of a language based on the novelty of material. Unlike the example of Schoenberg, the Russian composer adopts an attitude of negation of the subject.

Synthesis: Using forms and stylistic vestiges of the past (Baroque, Classicism, folklore as recreation), Stravinsky extracts these elements from the historical reality of the moment in which they were conceived. The result is a juxtaposition of expressions, giving rise to a music of surface characterized by the stasis of harmony and the mechanical repetition of rhythms.

Concrete examples: *Pulcinella* (1920) and *Symphony of Psalms* (1930).

According to Adorno, the dialectic of composition must respond to a form of deontology, opposing the banalization effected by the capitalist market. From the musical materials available to him, the composer must choose the attitude of creating a new language, and not the utilization of old elements and styles extracted from his historical reality and superimposed in the composition. In this way Adorno speaks of a progressive dialectic in the case of Schoenberg, who seeks with atonality and twelve-tone technique to create a novelty not consumable by the market, and of a regressive dialectic which, with Stravinsky, recovers forms of the past. Thus the value of the Epiphany we explained earlier is clearly exposed, where, from the appropriation of historical materials, Adorno's dialectic comes into operation. We now turn to study the cases in which the musical avant-garde of the 1950s will put into question the necessity of this dialectic, challenging the value and even the presence of the creator himself as well as the meaning of the process of creation of the work.

The debate over avant-garde positivism, *musique concrète*, and electronic music

Emerging at the end of the Second World War, the musical avant-gardes were born during the early years of the reconstruction of a Europe in ruins. The novel creators rejected the historical value of musical material as well as the subjectivity of the creator as criteria of aesthetic legitimacy. One does not need specialized psychological knowledge to realize that what appeared at the end of the war as an aesthetic aspiration involved an absolute rejection of old models, a need to rid oneself of figures of authority, and a longing to build on totally new bases. In fact, the new composers proposed innovations in all fields: graphic symbols to represent new repertoires of actions, different ways of using traditional instruments, new ways to fix (record or notate) music. Electroacoustic music in its two forms—*musique concrète* and electronic music—made its appearance, giving arguments to proponents of the absolute value of materials and of composition as *tabula rasa*.

Adorno, embodiment of the Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetic of European musical composition, could but oppose this attitude of the avant-garde.

“One ought to ask one day, in music as in everything else, what drives men, since they see the open horizon before them, to want to restore the order of systems instead of breathing freely. Works like *Erwartung* and even earlier ones, like *Elektra*, have an infinitely closer connection to the creator's own consciousness and to the unconscious of today's listeners than any style imposed by decree.”²²

²² « Il faudrait s'interroger un jour, en musique comme ailleurs, sur ce qui pousse les hommes, dès que l'horizon est réellement ouvert devant eux, à vouloir remettre de l'ordre, au lieu de respirer, qu'on ait pu écrire des œuvres comme *Erwartung*, ou même déjà *Elektra*, qui ont un rapport infiniment plus étroit avec leur propre conscience et l'inconscient des auditeurs actuels que tout style imposé d'autorité. »

Theodor W. ADORNO, « Vers une musique informelle », dans *Quasi una fantasia*, French translation by Jean-Louis Leleu, Ole Hansen-Løve and Philippe Joubert, Paris, Gallimard, 1982, p. 311-312.

Centered on Boulez and Cage, Adorno's criticisms were in fact directed at the majority of young creators of the 1950s, who used devices or procedures in order to legitimize them aesthetically: serialism's series in total serialism, the computation of probabilities in stochastic music, the predetermined paths of open form works, the experimental character of electroacoustic material... According to Adorno, these new ways of conceiving musical composition and its rules were highly reifying, in the sense that they attempted to hide the composer's free will, choice, and intuition, obscuring them under the folds of a highly formalized discourse. In summary, the composer's identification with his materials was completely set aside as an initiating process of the work. The ambition of the avant-garde was to legitimize the scientific and objective value of sound materials by devising for composition an automatic methodology, leaving the individual and his creative intuition aside. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, as well as in the final articles of *Quasi una fantasia*, Adorno criticizes this radical attitude by which the compositional process is supplanted by the positivism of the materials used, both in Boulez's total serialism and in Cage's musical indeterminacy. What Adorno reproached them for was the radical attitude of "self-reference that closes upon itself in the identification of content and form"²³ of the pieces. According to Adorno, the way these composers assumed composition denied, on one hand, the historicity of musical material and, on the other, the confrontation of the creating subject with musical material in the process of realizing the work. This fetishism of material in the avant-gardes had as its fundamental consequence the disappearance of any possibility of teleology and metaphysics in the creative process; if music referred only to itself, the creative process ceased to have relevance in aesthetic legitimation. As a consequence, there occurred a literalness of material, with the pretension of an immediate aesthetic legitimation of the experimental act, without considering the vicissitudes of the creative process. Thus, the composer and the compositional system were separated in this way. Music was made according to rules and principles established from the outside that constructed an artistic objectivity whose value did not depend on the creative process that gave it life. With this way of approaching musical composition, the avant-gardes discard the mediation of the creating subject and his interaction with the material in the production process of the work. By short-circuiting every possibility of subjectivity in the creative process, total serialism opened the door to experimental instrumental models, bearers of new forms of writing. How to define these models? According to Dalhaus, their objective was

"[...] to test the possibility of aesthetisation or the aesthetic evidence of materials or methods that are only partially subject to composers' control."²⁴

The identification of content and form—the famous formula of Lévi-Strauss, taken up by Boulez, trying to introduce structuralism in matters of composition—²⁵ produces here a literalness of neutral material that has as its precondition a pretension of immediate aesthetic legitimation, without recourse to polarization by the subjectivity of the creator. Everything had to happen as if the composer did not exist... The subject and the method were split. Music was made according to rules and principles established externally, creating an artistic objectivity from which the creative process is presumed absent.

"[...] form depended directly on how the system was used. Moreover, the dream—the nightmare, perhaps—was carried out of a 'work' beyond the individual, beyond accident, a work in which, once the composer had carefully prepared his base material, all he had to do was launch the mechanism so assembled and let the realization occur."²⁶

The same is inferred from Iannis Xenakis's view, regarding the composition *Achorripsis*:

²³ « [...] clôture auto-référentielle dans l'identification du contenu et de la forme. »

Anne BOISSIERE, *op. cit.*, page 119.

²⁴ « [...] tester la possibilité d'esthétisation ou l'évidence esthétique de matériaux ou de méthodes qui ne sont soumis que partiellement au contrôle des compositeurs. »

Carl DALHAUS, « La crise de l'expérimentation », in *Contrechamps* n°3, Éditions l'Âge d'Homme, 1984, p. 106-117.

²⁵ "As sociologist Lévi-Strauss asserts about language itself, I remain convinced that in music there is no opposition between form and content, that there is not, on the one hand, the abstract and, on the other, the concrete. Form and content are of the same nature, subject to the same analysis."

« Ainsi que l'affirme le sociologue Lévi-Strauss à propos du langage proprement dit, je demeure persuadé qu'en musique il n'existe pas d'opposition entre forme et contenu, qu'il n'y a pas d'un côté, de l'abstrait, de l'autre, du concret. Forme et contenu sont de même nature, justiciables de la même analyse. »

Pierre BOULEZ, *Penser la musique aujourd'hui*. Paris : coll. Tel, Gallimard, 1963, p. 31.

²⁶ « [...] la forme dépendait directement des modes d'utilisation du système. De surcroît, se réalisait le rêve — le cauchemar, peut-être — d'une "œuvre" au-delà de l'individuel, au-delà de l'accident, d'une œuvre où, le compositeur ayant préparé avec soin son matériau de base, il ne lui restait presque plus qu'à lancer le mécanisme ainsi monté et le laisser accomplir la réalisation. »

Pierre BOULEZ, « Le système et l'idée », in *HARMONIQUES* n° 1, Paris, éd. IRCAM/Ch. Bourgois, 1986, p. 87.

“[...] it corresponds to this basic idea of unifying and making a kind of sound automaton that would function by itself once it was plugged in.”²⁷

In the same sense, Xenakis states, in relation to the composition of his piece *Pola ta dhina*:

I.X. – “Here intuition again worked. That is, after the experience of earlier works, it was easy to simulate many things. That is what I did, without any calculation, that is to say that (the composition, N.B.) went by itself.”

F.D. – “Do you mean you have recreated something that is in the same style... that works in the ST series, for example?”

I.X. – “Or before, or Pithoprakta too.”²⁸

In other words, in the name of the omnipotence of systems and the idiosyncrasy of the avant-garde, the composer is masked in his personal decisions by the systematic processes to which he attributes the composition of the work. Adornian critiques presuppose a starting point assumed by total serialism and musical indeterminacy, which could be described as *tabula rasa*. But what for these two avant-garde currents was an attitude, a choice, for electroacoustic music was an inevitable fate. The electroacoustic material lacked history; everything had to be done and built, being by nature fundamentally experimental.

In the case of *musique concrète*, the “self-referential closure” occurs through the *écoute réduite* (reduced listening), a phenomenological proposal of the sound from its source of production. This cut is capable of producing a new materiality of sound-in-itself, outside its nature as a signifying index of a signified reality. By reducing the phenomenon to its manifestation, reduced listening detects the sound object, capable of interacting with other sound objects to produce *musique concrète*.

Under these conditions, it is nothing surprising to see how the manipulation of material fully assumes the role of the compositional process. According to Pierre Schaeffer’s definition, musical form cannot be a projection that acts like a horizon of realization, since this intuition of totality would situate the work in the realm of the abstract.²⁹ In his view, music cannot be grasped by potential virtuality, but rather is realized from combinations of multiple ways of treating the material.

Born in Cologne under the aegis of serialism, electronic music proposed a series of sound production and generation techniques called additive synthesis (composition of sound spectra from simple waves) and subtractive (reduction of the components of a sound spectrum via filters). Responding to the serial principle of parallel arrangement of microforms and macroforms based on identical structural principles, electronic composition tried to generate the form of the work from the characteristics of the sound (spectral configuration, dynamic evolution of partials in time, etc.). This ideal clashed with the state of the technology of the era, which did not allow, or barely allowed, the generation of evolving and changing sonorities.

Adorno, who doubted the possibility of a work without notation, had a rather tepid relationship with electronic music, though he admitted knowing nothing of it:

²⁷ « [...] cela correspond à cette idée de base qui est d’unifier et de faire une sorte d’automate sonore qui marcherait tout seul une fois que vous mettez la prise de courant. »

François DELALANDE, *Il faut être constamment un immigré, Entretiens avec Xenakis*, Bibliothèque de Recherche Musicale, INA - Buchet/Chastel, Pierre Zech editor, Paris, 1997, p. 66.

²⁸ « I.X. – [...] là c’est l’intuition de nouveau qui a fonctionné. C’est-à-dire qu’après l’expérience des œuvres précédentes, il était facile de simuler des tas de choses. C’est ce que j’ai fait, sans calcul, c’est-à-dire que cela allait tout seul, quoi. »

F.D. – « C’est à dire que vous avez recréé quelque chose qui en somme est du même style ... que les pièces par exemple de la série ST ? »

I.X. – « Ou avant, ou de *Pithoprakta* aussi. »

Ibid., p. 68.

²⁹ “As we have said, we apply the term “abstract” to conventional music because it is first conceived in the mind, then notated theoretically, and finally realised in an instrumental performance. We have called our music ‘concrete’ because it is constructed from pre-existing elements borrowed from any sound material, whether noise or musical sound, and then composed experimentally through direct construction, resulting in the realisation of a compositional intention without the aid of ordinary musical notation, which has become impossible.”

« Nous appliquons, nous l’avons dit, le qualificatif d’abstrait à la musique habituelle, du fait qu’elle est d’abord conçue par l’esprit, puis notée théoriquement, enfin réalisée dans une exécution instrumentale. Nous avons appelé notre musique “concrète” parce qu’elle est constituée à partir d’éléments préexistants, empruntés à n’importe quel matériau sonore, qu’il soit bruit ou son musical, puis composée expérimentalement par une construction directe, aboutissant à réaliser une volonté de composition sans le secours, devenu impossible, d’une notation musicale ordinaire. »

Pierre SCHAEFFER, « La musique mécanisée », in *Polyphonie*, Paris, Richard Masse, 1950.

“I myself have not worked in any studio, so I am not qualified by my own experience to pass judgment on the relation between electronics and the unity of musical meaning.”³⁰

Which did not prevent him from voicing his criticisms:

“Undoubtedly, the interest in electronic music has something problematically related to *bricolage*. It profits from the way in which everywhere, even in intellectual spheres, the means replace ends [...]”³¹

“Already it seems more plausible to think that electronic music, which ultimately appeared as a technique on the margins of strictly musical technique, would be external to the latter; that it would have nothing to do with the immanent kinetic laws of music.”³²

One of the reasons why Adorno considered electronic music with a certain disdain was doubtless the limitation of the technical resources available to composers of the time. For example, continuous sounds in electronic music could not compete with instrumental sounds because of the lack of evolution of their spectral components.

Since the arrival of modulation in synthesizers from the 1960s onward, with the generalization of computer work and the later appearance of the home studio via mobile and portable digital units, this defect disappeared without leaving traces.

V. CONCLUSION

We summarize here the conclusions of the path we have followed in this research. The characterization and revelation of the Epiphany, a fundamental concept for the characterization of musical materials that had until now gone unnoticed, seems to have consequences in all aspects of the creative musical process. 1) The appropriation of musical materials, which, from being historical, become part of the composition, moving from neutral to polarized. To date there had been no plausible explanation of the difference between these two degrees of material, even if it was implied by the texts analyzed. 2) The “truth content,” an irreplaceable piece of Adorno’s system, is already glimpsed in the moment of the Epiphany, as well as the development of materials necessary for its attainment. This is none other than the process by which the creator alternates between objective knowledge of them and embodied knowledge, thus leading to the detailed composition of the work. 3) The subjective universality of the work is explained by the alignment of the components that interact in individuality, producing an analogous effect in future listeners of the work via the mirror neurons. 4) The dialectic of composition cannot be explained without the Epiphany, which allows the composer to choose between what Adorno considers a novel composition (Schoenberg, progressive dialectic) or reactionary (Stravinsky, regressive dialectic). 5) The controversy with Boulez and Cage and the electroacoustic avant-gardes of the 1950s would be explained by the lack of an Epiphany where the musical materials were identified with the composer. That was impossible in the case of total serialism, due to the millions of combinatorial possibilities that prevented any possibility of concretizing an individual aesthetic judgement and, consequently, a personalization of materials. Finally there were no criteria to determine why one combinatorial choice was preferable to another; paradoxically, the greatest combinatorial rigor led to a random choice of materials. It was also impossible to project individuality in the case of aleatoric music, termed by Cage “the composition of not-willing,” where, precisely, the realization of a device made the sonic result independent of the creator’s decisions.

Analogous to a luthier, the composer was the first surprised by the music resulting from the devices he had conceived.

In the case of *musique concrète*, the “fetishism” of material manipulations had been equated with the form of the work. In regard to electronic music, the additive and subtractive techniques for creating new sonorities as well as the manipulation of studio apparatus and the alluring novelty of sound materials tended to aestheticize the

³⁰ Je n’ai travaillé moi-même dans aucun studio, et ne suis donc pas qualifié, par ma propre expérience, pour porter un jugement sur les rapports de l’électronique et de l’unité de sens musical ».

Theodor W. ADORNO, « Musique et nouvelle musique », dans *Quasi una fantasia, op. cit.*, p. 287.

³¹ « Sans doute l’intérêt que rencontre la musique électronique a-t-il partie liée, de façon trouble, avec le bricolage. Elle profite de la manière dont partout, y compris dans le domaine intellectuel, les moyens se substituent aux fins [...] »

Ibid., p. 286.

³² « Il est déjà plus plausible de penser que l’électronique, qui finalement est apparue, en tant que technique, en dehors de la technique proprement musicale, serait extérieure à cette dernière ; qu’elle n’aurait rien à voir avec les lois cinétiques immanentes de la musique. »

Ibid., p.287.

musical material by its mere status as novelty, making one forget that whether electroacoustic or not, the work results from the individual decisions of its creator.

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