

The Cost of Affordance: a review of *After Adorno* by Tia DeNora.

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Tia DeNora, *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*
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Method is not something to be applied to an object in a fixed, unvarying manner. Instead, method should adapt itself to its object and legitimate itself by the light it sheds on it. - Adorno, Ideen zur Musiksoziologie

"To speak of the sociology of music is to perpetuate a notion of music and society as separate entities" (131). Simply put, the *sociology of music*, and musicology as well, tend to view the relations between music and society in one of three ways: music is caused by society, society is reflected in music, or music determines social practice.

In Tia DeNora's new book, entitled *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*, all three of these conceptions are critiqued. Her corrective is to propose a "dynamic" model of the socio-musical relation under the name of *music sociology*. And here is the rub: the forefather of this new music sociology is Theodor Adorno.

How can the man who despised jazz, Stravinsky, and the "culture industry" be the progenitor of DeNora's value-free music sociology? (This question is even more puzzling considering that DeNora's last book bears the highly un-Adornoesque title *Music in Everyday Life*.) The answer: by

plucking the methodological kernel from Adorno's music sociology, while discarding the husk.

According to DeNora, Adorno made two great contributions to music sociology. First, Adorno articulated not only how social practices shape music, but how musical procedures (the specific ways in which music handles its materials) possess a moral dimension and become exemplary for praxis. This is just as apparent in Adorno's high esteem for Schoenberg's music, which provides "a contrast structure against which 'all the darkness and inclairity of the world' could be illuminated" (152), as it is in his critique of popular music mass produced by the culture industry. Second, Adorno's musically dynamic conception emphasized listener response, and not just the musical text, by embracing both detailed analyses of Beethoven, Berg and Mahler, as well as a containing a typology of listeners. This is critically balanced against two problems with Adorno's work: 1) its prejudicial dismissal of jazz, popular music, and Stravinsky, and 2) Adorno's high level of abstraction and generality, without a grounding in empirical research. DeNora chides Adorno for using examples to illustrate a theory, not to support one.

With this methodology in place, DeNora develops her theory of musical affordance. Balancing and articulating the dynamic relation between music and society requires neither ignoring music's ability to shape its own reception, nor ignoring the creative and unique ways in which listeners

appropriate music to their own ends. The "right level" of generality,

consists of a focus on music-as-practice, and music as providing a basis for practice. It deals with music as a formative medium in relation to consciousness and action, as a resource for - rather than a medium about - world building. Within this dynamic conception of music's social character, focus shifts from what music depicts, or what it can be "read" as saying about society, to what makes it possible. And to speak of "what music makes possible" is to speak of what music "affords." (46)

The proviso is that musical affordances must be analyzed within the confines of specific environments, situations, and local conditions. Moreover, "music" can be anything from entire works, to fragments, to Muzak, to whistling while you work. "What is key here is how the music is, or comes to be, meaningful *to the actors who engage with it*, including such matters as whether the relevant actors notice it" (49).

As an illustration what music affords, DeNora reprises an interview from *Music in Everyday Life*. Lucy, an amateur musician who sings alto in a choir, described to DeNora her attraction certain "juicy" chords in Brahms' music because these chords contain middle voices, which afford Lucy an opportunity for self-knowledge. The middle voices are:

Lucy:...part of the background...It's the sopranos and the tenors that carry the song, if you like, and the basses and the altos that *fill out* to make it a sort of - [she stops and looks at me questioningly]

DeNora: A sonic whole?

Lucy: Yeah. And I think that maybe that characterizes me in life, that I don't like being in the limelight, I like...being part of a group. And, you know, pressing forward and doing my bit but not - [pause]

DeNora: Filling in, as it were, the needed middle?

Lucy: Yeah. Seeing what needs doing and doing it but not being spotlighted and being 'out front' sort of thing.¹

Glossing this dialogue, DeNora writes, "For Lucy, music provided a template or model against which self-knowledge could be fleshed out or mapped. And it is here that we can see how an individual's conception of some particular musical structure or set of musical properties comes to be projected by that individual as a grid or guide for the work of tracing out (articulating) awareness of some other realm" (67).

The theory of musical affordance focuses on how actors appropriate music to their own ends, making connections, as Lucy puts it, between the "me *in* life" and the "me *in* music" (67). In Lucy's case, music affords "a map or model of who she is and also of who she wishes to be...Lucy shapes up a form of understanding, produces knowledge (about herself in this case) against the structures what she finds in music" (67).

But how relevant is this fact? Perhaps the emphasis should not merely stress that music affords opportunities for self-discovery, but rather highlight the quality of this self-discovery. DeNora overlooks this point when she compares Lucy's musical affordances to Adorno's: "I described how Lucy found joy in hearing 'juicy' chords because within these moments she was able to 'see herself' or her role in life. So too, as Adorno put it with reference

to Schoenberg, 'passions are no longer simulated...[but] are registered without disguise" (104). I must admit my puzzlement at this sentence. In this passage from Adorno's *Philosophy of Modern Music*, the claim is being developed that Schoenberg's works no longer make expression into a character-type, *espressivo*, which is contained as one trope among others mediated by musical form; rather, through a critique of musical form, Schoenberg brings immediate expression forward. In particular, Adorno is referring to the terse, explosive works of Schoenberg's free atonal period, works like the *Five Orchestral Pieces* and the *Six Little Piano Pieces*, whose aphoristic, highly condensed, musical form criticizes the merely rhetorical Romantic *espressivo*. "Schoenberg's *espressivo*...differs in quality from Romantic expression precisely by means of that intensification which thinks this *espressivo* through to its logical conclusion."² Similarly, the model of critical theory that Schoenberg's music affords Adorno is different in quality from the reified, "me in music," which Brahms' music affords Lucy.

By plucking out the great "contributions" of Adorno to music sociology, while abandoning the negative component of his critical theory, DeNora is forced into converting Adorno's qualitative claims into merely quantitative norms. For example, in summarizing Adorno's project of negative dialectics, DeNora produces this misreading: "The [critical] task of reason was to accommodate, and through formulation

as knowledge, arrange (without suppressing) complexity, diversity, heterogeneity - to hold as much 'material' as is possible within compromised consciousness" (10). It strikes me that it is not the quantity, rather the quality of the contradiction between "materials" which is significant to reason's critical task.

The quantitative impulse also lurks behind DeNora's goal for music sociology: "Music sociology will have achieved its ultimate aim, in other words, when - in all realms of social life - we come to attend to the sounds that are all around us, to know these as our accomplices (and opponents) in the doing, being, and feeling that is social life" (157). The great aim of music sociology is total attentiveness to the manner in which we cause, reflect, and are determined by, music. But quantity and completeness of attention is not a substitute for a qualitative praxis. No light has been shed to legitimate the application of DeNora's musico-sociological method.

In this age of trying to "absorb Adorno" in order to "get past him", one must remember that the critical negativity, and the high level of generality and abstraction, which are present in Adorno's music sociology, are not blind spots of which Adorno was unaware. Nor can they be wiped away with value-free, empirical sociology. Thus, "a sociology which is committed to the 'positive' is in danger of losing all critical consciousness whatsoever...but only a critical spirit can make science

more than a mere duplication of reality by means of thought."³ Any music sociology which positions itself after Adorno has two options: either have the veracity use Adorno's negative dialectical method against Adorno (and critique Adorno's claims from some distinct, interested perspective), or have the courage and confidence to set forth its own substantive, methodological principles, which can stand on their own against Adorno's findings, without claiming a false patrimony. The sociologist who comes after Adorno must remember: "The given will only offer itself up to the view which negates it from a perspective of true interest."⁴

¹ Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 69. This passage is quoted again with some severe cuts in *After Adorno*, p. 67.

² Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, tr. A. G. Mitchell and W. Blomster, (New York: Continuum, 1973), 38.

³ The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, *Aspects of Sociology*, with a preface by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, (United States of America: Beacon Press, 1972), 11.

⁴ *Aspects of Sociology*, 11.