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Music as Secularized Prayer: On Adorno’s Benjaminian Understanding of Music and its Language-Character

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I draw attention to conceptual similarities in Walter Benjamin’s and Theodor W. Adorno’s reflection about language, with special attention to Benjamin’s 1916 essay about language as such, including its theological impulses. In Adorno’s case, I concentrate on language theory as it comes forth in relation to his philosophy of music and the supposed language-character of music. I argue that this particular connection between Benjamin and Adorno is largely unexplored in the literature, and I show that their conceptual affinities have far-reaching consequences for a proper understanding of Adorno’s philosophy as a whole. Music is of fundamental importance for Adorno’s critical theory, and this fact points to an intricate entwinement between materialism and theology, stemming from Benjamin’s theory of language. Thinking of music as secularized prayer means to emphasize that music relates to reality in a way that resembles the logic of Benjamin’s understanding of a pre-lapsarian language of divine names.

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Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) is undoubtedly one of the most distinguished music philosophers of all times, although still a highly controversial one. The verdicts about him vary from “grouchy uncle who doesn’t like any music written in the last 20 years” (Miller 2011), to “the first philosopher since Pythagoras to have something new to say about music” (Hullot-Kentor 2008, 54).¹

In this essay I will not concentrate on the allegedly upsetting aspects of Adorno’s thought on music and commercial culture, which are well documented.² However, in order to go further to the interesting side of his philosophy of music, a few things that

¹In fact, Hullot-Kentor sharpens this verdict by claiming: “In all of history – Pythagoras included – Adorno is the only philosopher of world importance whose musicological expertise was in every regard of a calibre equal to his philosophical capacity; Nietzsche would by comparison be an amateur” (2008, 54).

²See, for example, Witkin (2003). To verify the controversial side of Adorno’s thought it is enough to search the Internet for critical comments on Adorno’s critique of popular music. Compare with Nye (1988), Baugh (1990), and Brown (1992).
stand behind the controversial features of his thought on music will have to be mentioned. First of all: his approach to music is thoroughly normative. Adorno makes clear statements concerning the authenticity and inauthenticity of individual musical works or oeuvres, depending on various factors. But he is also normative in the sense that musical expressions are evaluated in a manner that comes close to an evaluation of referential language; they appear to be taken as true or false.

In Adorno’s view, however, music can be neither wholly authentic, nor absolutely logical, nor exactly like signifying language, but its character is, in various senses, similar to language: “Musik ist sprachähnlich” (Adorno 1978, 251) – it has a “language-character” (Paddison 1991). Among other things, this gives music a distinctly cognitive aspect, which demands a serious theoretical reflection that may at lead us towards a more qualified debate about the problem of truth (Bowie 2007, 309–375).

In this context, “the problem of truth” can be comprehended as follows: how do we develop a theoretical perspective on our own time that is critically aware of the fact that we cannot transcend our context and establish a neat package of truth to have at our disposal; and yet – to approach an idea developed further by Michel Foucault in his late lecture series at Collège de France – one that is rigorously focused on the idea of a desirable, empathic truth; truth as something that we do not have at hand and therefore need to strive towards as something that may change us and liberate us (compare with Foucault 2005, 19)? It is against the backdrop of such a question about truth that I will approach the truth-dimension of Adorno’s philosophy of music, by giving close attention to an often-neglected affinity with Walter Benjamin’s early philosophy of language.

Before I move further into that particular discussion, however, I would like to say something more about the controversial side of Adorno’s music philosophy. What about the music that Adorno generally understands as inauthentic or heteronomous? How is this inauthenticity and heteronomy related to musical authenticity and autonomy? The answers are to be found in Adorno’s materialism.

### Materialism and Musical Authenticity

According to Adorno, “authentic” (or autonomous) music tells us something about society and ourselves through its very construction, through its materiality, because its construction captures something true about the material conditions of music in a certain time. It also tells us something about how these conditions differ from material conditions in other times. This materialistic dimension establishes a fundamental relationship between the interiority of musical works and the social exteriority in which these works are composed.

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3See Barck et al. (2005), 55–57. Authenticity and inauthenticity are not the most frequently used terms in Adorno’s works. In this essay I use them rather generally, to capture his normative thinking about successful and unsuccessful music. It should also be remembered that authenticity in the aesthetic context of Adorno’s thought has different connotations than the existentialist “jargon of authenticity” that Adorno criticizes elsewhere.

4Generally speaking, Adorno’s relation to Benjamin is far from neglected. On the contrary, Adorno’s dependence on Benjamin’s conceptuality is more than well documented, as well as their collaboration and correspondence. Especially recognized is Adorno’s reception of key concepts from Benjamin’s work on German Baroque drama (see Benjamin 1998). What I have in mind is the specificities of Benjamin’s early view on language, and how this view on language resounds concretely in Adorno’s philosophy of music. Although some commentators develop the connection between Benjamin’s theory of language and Adorno’s aesthetic theory (such as Duarte 2005), it is an aspect I find to be absent in several ambitious attempts to conceive of Adorno’s philosophy of music (see, for example, Witkin 1998, Bowie 2007, and Phillips 2015). It should also be added that the Benjaminian aspect of Adorno’s aesthetics is developed further in his unfinished magnum opus, Aesthetic Theory, as a general feature of art (Adorno 1997, see for example 204–205).
and performed. Hence, “unfolding” in the interiority of music is nothing less than “extra-artistic, social rationality” (Adorno 1976, 207).

Adorno’s idea of musical materiality is formatted by dialectical and historical understandings of materialism (Paddison 1993). On one hand, the centrality of the idea of the materiality of music underscores that Adorno approaches music at the level of historical development, as conditioned by physical factors (rather than opting for a timeless spiritual definition). On the other hand, and in a typically left-Hegelian manner, Adorno interprets the cultural and spiritual side of the human work with these material conditions as the materialization of spirit, moving, as it were, towards second nature. Musical materiality is thus congealed history, indicative of the limits of human freedom and spirit in relation to nature. Thus, to use another left-Hegelian expression, one can say that the idea of the materiality of music captures the moment of alienation in musical creativity.

The material conditions of music can be summarized as all the historically produced compositional conventions that carry the very possibilities for progressive – that is, technically innovative – musical production in a particular historical moment. Hence, a specific chord that was judged innovative and progressive given the material musical conditions in the time of, let’s say, the young Beethoven may need to be severely criticized as inadequate and ornamental in its function just a couple of decades later. The chord may turn out to be wholly improper given the “laws” regulating material development – constitutive for the particular technical stage – of music in that specific context. Authentic musical production happens as intense work upon the musical materiality as it appears in the present; it proceeds in utter respect for the exact material conditions that are handed over to the composer by previous compositions (Paddison 1993).

Paradoxically, it is only by being produced in this autonomous (and not socially engaged) way that music may “tell” us something about social things outside its own musical sphere. Hence, in this context autonomy means to be concentrated on musical immanence, rather than on music’s social externality. By stubbornly resisting the temptation to use musical expressivity in the mode of an unconditioned spiritual freedom – that is, to consciously relate itself to the social whole, to seek for relevance – music attunes itself with the social sphere to which its material conditions already refer. The referential aspect, the idea that music tells us something about its social exteriority, is thus wholly hidden in the interiority of the material conditions, which have developed historically and socially as second nature. To truly express oneself musically is thus to build music in a way that is immersed in this materiality and its inner logic, following the laws of the material conditions. An example would be Arnold Schönberg’s intricate maneuvers to restructure the development from tonality to free atonality into atonal serialism, in which certain material problems that had been posed in tradition from Bach and onwards were solved, or at least moved further, in a decisive way.

However, this way of expressing it should not be mixed up with any form of determinism. Indeed, for Adorno, to compose is not to create ex nihilo, but to be attentive to the material that consists of both formal conditions and musical content. But to achieve something of objective value, there is still a need for radical creative subjective idiosyncrasy and for a sense of the historical incompleteness of the musical material. What Adorno is after when he speaks about laws and logicality is the elusive trans-subjective dimension of composition, viewed as historical process – both continuous and discontinuous – that is configured but never exhausted by general societal conditions. This trans-subjective side of music does not cancel its subjective side, but its subjective freedom is limited in a way
that sets the stage for an idea of objectivity that challenges the traditional epistemic relation between subject and object, which in Adorno’s view is guilty of a more thorough extinction of freedom in modern society.

The following is a typical example of Adorno’s way of reflecting on the material interiority of music in view of its material-processual character in history:

The merits of a work, its level of form, its internal construction, tend to become recognizable only as the material ages or when the sensorium becomes dulled to the most striking features of the form. Beethoven could probably be heard as a composer only after the gesture of his titanic – his primary effect – was outstripped by the crasser effects of younger composers like Berlioz. (Adorno 1997, 195)

Hence, in Adorno’s musical materialism any “message” that music may carry through its expression defies all attempts to remove it from music itself, from its materiality. This idea can also be seen as an affirmation of authentic music’s absolute deviation from language. If language represents human spirit, that is freedom, music is basically matter, unfreedom. Yet, in the process (which I have already touched upon by introducing the notions of “second nature” and “alienation”) music is materially deformed in and through its own material dialectic, which means that its own material dialectic always moves it ambiguously towards the spiritual.

In contrast to all this, the music that Adorno judges to be inauthentic – and heteronomous – misunderstands its own limited capability of being free expression, and it is therefore only qualified to tell us something about its fundamental unfreedom given the social situation in which it appears. Through its radical and unconscious adaptation to social norms, this music tells the story of its own unfreedom – the story of how it is produced according to capitalist norms. As music becomes commodified, its precarious materiality is confirmed on a different level (compared to authentic and autonomous music). Commodified, or reified, music is more or less disconnected from the internal history of musical material development (and the form of “enlightenment” through technical progress that this very development expresses through authentic music). As I have already mentioned, reified music thus loses its ability to musically express the problems of modernity. In “inauthentic” music, the most severe problems – which indeed haunt authentic music as well, as an inner material force – appear at the very surface, as an unfree relation to the same social totality. This social totality, this second nature, moves inauthentic music in a law-like fashion.

To put it differently, the “telling” thing with such inauthentic music is therefore found not in its inner musical structure or in its (lack of) expression, but in its fundamental heteronomy and its outer dependence on the market or political forces. It is absolutely dependent on the social pressure that authentic and autonomous music resists through its narrow view on the musical material conditions. In this way, authentic music is characterized by its distance from social totality through its proper work, which to some degree can be understood as non-alienated work, thus representing creative freedom – although this freedom is still only a conditioned freedom in critical relation to society at large. Fundamentally, society always conditions its materiality and technology.

Essentially, although a bit simplified, this means that Adorno’s “proper” philosophy of music concerns itself mainly – which is not to say only – with what he views as authentic music, or at least with musical traditions that he understands as the traditions in which music develops progressively; while inauthentic music is mostly addressed in his
sociological and social psychological reflections on culture and culture industry.⁵ These latter works are concerned more with the social logic of commodification and reification, stifling of the freedom of true individuality and creativity in favor of the systemic functionality of modern capitalist society (see Horkheimer and Adorno 2002).

The philosophical embracement of a certain musical tradition/development and the critique of commodification in other musical contexts are thus connected to the question of the very possibility of genuine experience of the predicaments of modern life. In his essay “On Popular Music,” Adorno makes the following claim about the commercial hit-song:

Most important of all, the harmonic cornerstones of each hit – the beginning and the end of each part – must beat out the standard scheme. This scheme emphasizes the most primitive harmonic facts no matter what has harmonically intervened. Complications have no consequences. This inexorable device guarantees that regardless of what aberrations occur, the hit will lead back to the same familiar experience, and nothing fundamentally novel will be introduced. (Adorno 1941, 18)

What is at stake for Adorno is the question about experiencing or not experiencing something that goes against social pressure, or rather, experiencing the negative consequences of the economic pressure in a capitalist society. The critical key concepts to capture why people accept this unfreedom (and even conceive of it as freedom) are standardization and pseudo-individualization, which lead to a social-psychological framework for analyzing musical functionality and the role of popular music in late modern society’s economic reconstitution of individuality and freedom:

Stylization of the ever-identical framework is only one aspect of standardization. Concentration and control in our culture hide themselves in their very manifestation. Unhidden they would provoke resistance. […] The necessary correlate of musical standardization is pseudo-individualization. By pseudo-individualization we mean endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself. Standardization of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were. Pseudo-individualization, for its part, keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or “pre-digested.” (Adorno 1941, 24–25)

When it comes to “serious” music Adorno claims:

Musical production which in the narrower sense does not subordinate itself unconditionally to the law of the market – that is, ‘serious’ music with the exception of the obviously quantitatively dominant music, which likewise serves the market in disguise – is that music that expresses alienation. (Adorno 2002c, 395–396, emphasis added)

Two things should be noted here. First, Adorno’s idea of commodified music is not at all limited to the popular sphere (or to jazz), but, as the emphasis inserted in the quotation already indicates, Adorno readily extends it to the so-called serious musical sphere, which of course is tremendously commercial. This is important if one want to follow Adorno’s thinking along the way. His argument for a certain tradition of musical development is not, in principle, a conservative one. Secondly, and as a summary of this section: really serious music in modernity, authentic and autonomous music, is not free or

⁵It can, however, be argued that Adorno occasionally problematizes this distinction through his oeuvre and not the least in his uncompleted manuscript about musical reproduction (Adorno 2006b).
unconditioned but, in contrast to commodified inauthentic music, it is conditioned in a way that enables us to experience the social alienation that modernity has brought about.

**Walter Benjamin and Language**

While I have thus far emphasized the materialistic underpinnings of Adorno’s philosophy of music, it is nevertheless not an exaggeration to claim that Adorno’s conception of music, especially when it touches on music’s similarity to language, is grounded in a theological discourse. I will now argue that this theological dimension of Adorno’s philosophy of music owes a lot to Walter Benjamin’s thought, and especially one of Benjamin’s earliest texts “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” (written in 1916). It must be clear from the outset that, although Adorno never makes any explicit references to this text, I will view Benjamin’s understanding of language in this early text as being of fundamental importance in order to grasp some of the details of Adorno’s understanding of music and its Sprachähnlichkeit.⁶

In the essay mentioned above, Benjamin argues that language is characteristic of absolutely everything in the world, and that language essentially has to do with the expression of singular things and their unique identity. Language as such does not have to do with communication about general traits in reality. After a general survey of this theory, Benjamin moves to a biblical-mythological context, establishing a connection between his view of language as such and the biblical view of creation.

According to the second part of Benjamin’s essay, everything has its own unique language because God created and differentiated it through God’s own word. Human language has its uniqueness in the fact that the human being was created in order to name other created things and thus to secure the divine integrity of creation through knowledge about it. When human being names things in the Garden of Eden, these things are linguistically fulfilled, as it were. Human language is in this sense passive. It does not communicate about things, but through human language things are coming to their expression in God’s creative language.

For God created things; the Creative word in them is the germ of the cognizing name, just as God, too, finally named each thing after it was created. But, obviously, this naming is only an expression of the identity in God of the word that creates and the name that knows, not the prior solution of the task that God expressly assigns to man himself: that of naming things. In receiving the mute, nameless language of things and transmitting it through names into sounds, man performs this task. It would be insoluble, were not the name-language of man and the nameless language of things related in God and released from the same creative word, which in things became communication of matter in magic community, and in man language of knowledge and name in blissful spirit. (Benjamin 2011, 261–262)

In Benjamin’s eyes, the “magic” introduced in this quotation is the “ur-problem of language”; it captures the mysterious fact that all authentic language always communicates “itself in itself,” with or without audible sounds, with or without legible signs (Benjamin 2011, 253). Communications of this kind happen in language, not through language. It is not something

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⁶This point of departure is of course not haphazard, as the following quotation from *Minima Moralia* makes clear:

Just as, according to Benjamin, painting and sculpture translate the mute language of things into a higher but similar one, so it might be supposed that music rescues name as pure sound – but at the cost of severing it from things. (Adorno 1985, 222–223)
about something that is given by language, but language is defined by the linguistic being of the entity in question, the true meaning of things. Human being’s naming/knowing is therefore characteristic of the very linguistic being of human being (as creativity is characteristic of God’s linguistic being) and it is through this linguistic being that creation gets known and truly identified in its meaning. To put it differently, the magic lies in the possibility of translating languages into other languages in order to know something in its true integrity.

For Benjamin, therefore, the biblical story of the Fall, and the temptation to eat from the tree of knowledge, is not a story about the origin of knowledge as such. Human being was already perfect in knowledge before the Fall, through language itself. The temptation in the story is not a temptation to know, but according to Benjamin it is a temptation into “nameless knowledge”:

The name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the Fall marks the birth of the human word; that in which name no longer lives intact and that which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to become, as it were from without, expressly magic. The word must communicate something (other than itself). That really is the fall of the spirit of language. The word as something externally communicating, a parody as it were – by the expressly mediate word – of the expressly immediate, creative word of God, and the decay of the blissful spirit of language, the Adamite spirit, that stands between them. (Benjamin 2011, 263)

This crucial difference between (lapsarian) human word-language and (pre-lapsarian) human name-language establishes a critical meta-conception of history and subjectivity. Word-language reflects human subjectivity in the communicative mode of finite human controlling and possessing. Given this, word language is typical for historical existence, as the opposite of divine creative fullness. As one commentator of Benjamin’s text has stated, “To erect oneself as a subject is already to fall,” because for Benjamin “the Fall is already, in some sense, the infernal machine of modernity; and modernity the free fall of history” (Wohlfarth 1989, 161).

According to Benjamin’s linguistic scenery, judgment – a notion that is ultimately based in the divine judgment over sin – now takes the place of the name, in order to secure knowledge in human word-language.

For the essential context of language, the Fall has a threefold significance (in addition to its other meanings). In stepping outside the pure language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a mere sign; and this later results in the plurality of languages. The second meaning is that from the Fall, as restitution for the immediacy of name that was damaged by it, a new immediacy now arises: the magic of judgment, which no longer rests blissfully in itself. The third meaning that can perhaps be ventured is that the origin of abstraction, too, as a faculty of the spirit of language, is to be sought in the Fall. (Benjamin 2011, 263–264)

Instrumentality through signification, external judgment, and abstraction from things, these are three (interrelated) features of human language after the fall.

Language as Such and Music as Such

I will not go further into Benjamin’s idiosyncratic theory at this point. The important thing for now is the difference established between name and judgment, or between the pre- and post-lapsarian (or rather, lapsarian) conceptions of language. Even though it is nowhere explicitly
stated by Adorno, this Benjaminian difference – between a divine, or utopian, state of full presence, and a state in which language in its conception of things ambiguously hides and supresses their uniqueness in favor of control – is the obvious background to Adorno’s conception of the Sprachähnlichkeit of music to which we now turn. The following quotation from the essay “Music, Language, and Composition” (written in 1956) makes this rather obvious:

In comparison to signifying [meinenden] language, music is of a completely different type. In this lies its theological aspect. As appearance, what it says is simultaneously determinate and disclosed [verborgen]. Its idea is the divine name’s form [Gestalt]. It is demythologized prayer, liberated from the magic of influencing [Magie des Einwirkens]; which is the human attempt, futile as always, to name the name itself [Namen selber zu nennen], not to communicate meanings. (Adorno 2002a, 114, translation modified)

This passage does indeed bring up several Benjaminian concepts from the language essay (theology of the name, magic, the human attempt to influence, communication of meaning). However, it is not straightforwardly Benjaminian in every respect. If Benjamin was viewing human language and its predicament from the viewpoint of a pre-lapsarian, authentic, God-given language, Adorno gives voice to an idea that authentic language can be envisioned only through something human that ultimately is not language, namely music.

Since Adorno does not establish a pre-lapsarian position, his version of the Benjaminian “theology” of language becomes more like a utopian hope for a radically different conceptuality. Music as such gives some kind of witness to this utopia. By putting things in this order, Adorno intensifies the problem of grasping truth in a way that is congenial with his dialectical philosophy in general. In his philosophical magnum opus, Negative Dialectics (first published in 1966), Adorno claims in a Benjaminian manner: “What would be different, the no longer perverted essence, refuses a language that bears the stigmata of existence: there was a time when theologians would speak of mystical names” (Adorno 1973, 297, translation modified).

The expression “stigmata of existence” comes close to Benjamin’s important idea of the relation between history, subjectivity, and word-language. And “mystical names” is clearly a reference to the Jewish mystical tradition, not least the Kabbalah, according to which the Torah as a whole secretly consists of the name of God. In this tradition, furthermore, the Torah is also God’s instrument for the creation of the world in such a manner that the whole creation bears the imprint of the divine name. It is well known that Benjamin’s discussion of the name and human naming is in tune with this tradition, and it is clear that Adorno’s view on language has some kind of connection to the same mystical sources (Jacobson 2003). However, Adorno moves the discussion in a radically secularized direction by claiming that human existence as such robs language from ever coming into proper contact with the essence of reality. He argues that in the process of secularization, the subjects – that is, modern subjectivity – have “withdrawn the name from the languages” (Adorno 1973, 112). By this he appears to mean that modern subjectivity refuses to engage in language as something beyond mere instrumentality. But this, Adorno continues, does not call for a resurgence of religious faith, or a “philosophical trust in God” (while it is unclear whether or not the young Benjamin has something like this in mind). It is rather the idea of name itself, giving language its objective quality and its capacity of matching the thing, that has to be reinstalled philosophically to counter the accelerating alienation of subjectivism.
One of Adorno’s methodological examples of this philosophical need comes from Max Weber. Adorno notes that Weber, although “a scholar of so a positivistic bent,” went far in approaching the object through a dialectical constellation of concepts. In his critical discussion of definitions in sociology, Weber sided with an approach that went from individual historical cases to the construction of ideal types, rather than starting with a formal definition. In this context Weber explicitly uses the notion “composing” to capture the fact that the concepts are produced from below. Adorno comments on this musical notion in Weber’s text:

He [Weber] is indeed only looking at the subjective side, on the cognitive procedure. But it should be similar with this idea of composition as with its analogy, the musical composition. It is subjectively produced, but only successful when the subjective production disintegrates in it. The context it establishes – the “constellation” – becomes readable as sign of objectivity: of the spiritual substance. What resembles writing in such constellations is the conversion into objectivity, by way of language, of what has been subjectively thought and assembled. (Adorno 1973, 165, translation modified)

In this dense passage, Weber’s conceptual procedure is decoded through the idea of a successful musical production, which in its turn is related back to writing and language. This example makes clear that there is an intimate relationship between Adorno’s conception of truthful language and musical practice, and that the Schrankähnlichkeit of music has to do with an aesthetic theory of philosophical truth.

Music as Intention-less Language

If we return to Adorno’s philosophy of music, the following has to be underscored: it is the substance that comes with the name that is of interest to Adorno. In Benjamin’s theory, language is expression of the spiritual substance [Geisteswesen] of created things. In Adorno, the Schrankähnlichkeit of music lies fundamentally in its capacity to bring together elements in such a way that the result is elevated beyond subjective intention, legible as objective spiritual substance (which does not mean that musical materialism is given up, only that the musical material is seen as second nature). The relation between this idea and the name lies in the tradition of Jewish mysticism, in which the name comes from the creator before any human intention, and in which the name, therefore, represents the full, substantial presence of the real.

In both Benjamin and Adorno, we find a critical epistemological stance against subjective intention and intentionality. This critical gesture may rightly be interpreted in view of phenomenology and its particular insistence upon intentionality. However, given the background in Jewish mysticism, the critique of intention is not limited to this particular debate. It is grounded precisely in the theological idea that nature, through divine creation, always comes first, and that the true meaning of things is already present in itself before human intention and word-language approaches it. Given Benjamin’s theory of language

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7This, however, does not mean that they operate naively with the idea of an unmediated access to this reality. In Negative Dialectics Adorno has put this succinctly:

It has been observed that mysticism, whose very name expresses the hope to save the immediacy of metaphysical experience from being lost by the institutionalization of it, establishes in its turn a social tradition and comes from tradition, across the lines of demarcation between religions that regard each other as heretical. The name of the body of Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, means tradition. In the farthest ventures of metaphysical immediacy, it did not deny how much it is mediated. (Adorno 1973, 371, translation modified)
as such, the role of human being was to name, which means that the human task was to fulfill God’s creation in a very specific way: To name and give voice to what is already given, that is, to speak without subjective intention. I claim that the following quotation from Adorno’s reflection on music should be read precisely against this background:

Music aims at an intention-less language [intentionlose Sprache], but it does not separate itself once and for all from signifying language, as if there were different realms. A dialectic reigns here; everywhere, music is shot through with intentions … . Music points to the true language as to a language in which the content itself is revealed, but for this it pays the price of unambiguousness, which has gone over to the signifying language. (Adorno 2002a, 114)

It would be premature to interpret Adorno’s expression “true language” directly – or exactly – in terms of Benjamin’s Sprachtheologie, but it is nonetheless clear that, for Adorno, music as a structural continuum in time reveals something about the potentiality of language as such, namely, the promise of name-language to adequately represent and fully express the particular in its uniqueness. However, in this very process music loses its capacity to speak without ambiguity, and therefore it can never become a symmetrical alternative to conceptual language. It is at most – as art is in general – a true reflection of the fundamental problem of linguistic practice, and of social practice at large.

But Adorno’s approach to music does not end in a general aesthetic conclusion of this kind. The linguistic perspective on music is developed further in relation to conceptuality and judgment, reflecting a Benjaminian trait that connects the linguistic dimension with the materiality of music discussed above. If we keep the general idea of musical materiality in mind, with the notion of second nature in the center, we can understand the narrow context of Adorno’s essay “Music, Language and Composition” as an attempt to capture the sedimcnted material structures which form a syntactical scheme within the musical materiality itself. This feature lends musical form a semblance of invariance, and it gives an opening for a quasi-conceptual idea of regulated musical expression. The primary notion in this context is tonality, against the background of which musical judgment becomes meaningful in a linguistic sense (Adorno 2002a).

The syntactically framed (historically developed) materiality of music can now be explained with reference to the subjective intentions that are everywhere shooting through music, given the quotation above. According to Adorno, music as such is mimetic in a pre-rational way, and this comes forth in its basic resemblance to language, as its very mode of expression. Primitive music has its basic resemblance to language, although in comparison to civilized (that is modern) music, the language-character of primitive music is expressed on a level at which the subject and the object have not yet been differentiated. Yet, in the process of civilization and modernization, this primary language-character develops through differentiation of subject and object.8 To refer to the discussion above, music development is dependent on its inner material conditions, which means that its modern Sprachähnlichkeit is part of its historically conditioned materiality, that is, its second nature. In this way, modern music as modern has gone through a historical process of radicalized Versprachlichung (linguisization) compared

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8It would be too much of a detour to properly discuss Adorno’s view of primitive and undifferentiated music in view of the Benjaminian idea of a pre-lapsarian condition of “language as such,” but it has to be said clearly that, in general, Adorno is very hesitant toward all sorts of primitivism, and he judges restoration of archaic unity to be the quintessence of the jargon of authenticity, which he scorns.
to primitive music. In an essay called “On the Contemporary Relationship between Philosophy and Music” (written in 1953) Adorno states:

Now, the specifically linguistic character of music consists in the unity of its objectification, or, if you prefer, reification, with its subjectification; just as, everywhere, reification and subjectification are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually determinant poles. Since music … became integrated into the rationalization process of Western society, its linguistic character has become more pronounced. … [This] involves the fact that music, by dint of its disposition over the natural material, is transformed into a more or less stable system, whose individual moments have a meaning that is at once independent of and open to the subject. All of music from the beginning of the age of figured bass until today forms a coherent “idiom” that is largely given by tonality. What is called “musical” in everyday parlance refers precisely to this idiomatic character, to a relationship to music in which the material, by virtue of its reification, has become second nature to the musical subject.

(Adorno 2002b, 145)

This does not mean that the “pre-rational” mimetic mode of music is wholly pushed aside through the historical development of music into the tonal “idiom.” On the contrary, according to Adorno this modern rationalization of music describes an acute inner contradiction in the music material. In late modernity, this contradiction threatens to completely dissolve music and make it obsolete. According to Adorno, the modern tonal subjectification of music, with its peak in Beethoven, transforms the mimetic mode from early gestural and mimetic impulses of the subject into an “imitation of the things that transpire inside human beings” (Adorno 2002b, 145). Paradoxically enough, this Versprachlichung of music is later continued and heightened in the movement away from tonality. What happened in the musical development in composers such as Schönberg and Berg is possible to describe as a “breaking down of the idiomatic element,” but since this development simultaneously continues the process of rationalization of the musical material, it does not break with the linguistic mimesis of music as such; it breaks only with the particular musical convention – the tonal idiom – that made modern subjective expression possible and attractive in the first place. The subject that composes “is now no longer master of expression itself.” Adorno concludes with a complex summary that covers both of the linguistic tendencies in music, both its Sprachähnlichkeit and its Versprachlichung. I will try to make this clearer by inserting a few notes in the following quotation:

The more the music [in its Sprachähnlichkeit] comes to resemble the structure of language [through Versprachlichung], the more, at the same time, it ceases to be language, to say something [that is, music reveals that it is only Sprachähnlich not Sprache], and its alienation becomes perfect at the instant when it becomes most human [through the idiom of tonality].

(Adorno 2002b, 146)

The rationalization thus moves in the sequence of a Versprachlichung that in its extreme form also describes an Entsprechlichkeit (de-linguisization) of music. For Adorno, Schönberg’s late works even represent a kind of musical restoration in the sense that they, on the one hand, stubbornly cling to the musical-linguistic essence of its heritage while, on the other hand, they actually produce a turn in the material conditions of music that describes Entsprechlichkeit (Adorno 2002b, 155). This is the historical musical externalization of the basic aporia between magical mimesis (music’s
mysterious Sprachähnlichkeit) and rationalization; it is the dialectic of enlightenment in the very process of musical material development.9

Music, Metaphysics, and Theology

If we return to the properly Benjaminian aspect of Adorno’s philosophy of music, it can be concluded that music never is in control of the name.

The name itself is no more present for music than for human languages, and the theodicies so much in vogue at the moment, presenting music as a manifestation of the divine, are blasphemies. They afford music the dignity of revelation, although music, as an art, is nothing but the secularly preserved form of prayer, which in order to survive, prohibits its object and surrenders it to thought. (Adorno 2002b, 140–141, translation modified)

This statement makes wholly clear that Adorno’s philosophy of music is no theology of music. At most, it is a metaphysical reflection on music that preserves a theological impulse. In Negative Dialectics, Adorno argues that metaphysics should be seen not only as the secularization of theology into a rationalized philosophical conceptuality, something which positivism always has claimed. According to Adorno, productive metaphysics maintain theology and its promises critically, showing that the true possibility of theology lies in its very impossibility. Given my discussion about language and the name, one can possibly say that Benjamin’s metaphysics of name-language – in its theological pregnancy – returns critically in the idea of human word-language, which circumscribes the impossibility of language as such. In Negative Dialectics, Adorno argues against what he understands as Martin Heidegger’s quasi-theological question for a recovery of the name:

Through secularization the subjects have withdrawn the name from the languages, and the subjects’ relentlessness, not a philosophical trust in God, is what the objectivity of language needs. Language is more than sign only by means of its signifying power; where it most precisely and closely has [or captures] that was is meant. (Adorno 1973, 112, translation modified)

This subjective relentlessness is probably possible to couple with the essayistic spirit that Adorno develops in his 1958 essay called “The Essay as Form” (Adorno 1991). In that context, Adorno proposes a notion of creative subjectivity that composes its open-ended texts in an effort to stand up against the methodological rigor that has characterized truth-discourse since the very Cartesian founding moment of modern subjectivity. Hence, in view of the quotation from Negative Dialectics, the essayistic format becomes a critical framework of theological impossibility that correlates well with Benjamin’s notion of word-language, viewed in its radical difference from name-language. In this way the essay may be said to represent Entsprachlichung of discursive language in a way that at least can be compared to music (Adorno 1991).

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9This idea should be separated from Adorno’s critical discussion of restoration in Stravinsky’s music, which restores from the outside, as it were. That is, it is a restoration that does not follow from the dialectic within the material reality of music. The following sentence is telling:

The historical innervation of Stravinsky and his followers succumbed to the temptation of using stylistic procedures to reinstill the binding quality in music … These composers expressly intend to reconstruct the authenticity of music: to give it from the outside the mark of consecration, to equip it with the power to claim for itself that it is as it must be and could not be otherwise. (Adorno 2006a, 105–106)
In the last part of Negative Dialectics, Adorno gives the argument a wholly different twist by explicitly referring to music history:

The autonomous Beethoven is more metaphysical than Bach’s ordo; therefore more true. Subjectively liberated experience and metaphysical experience converge in the humane [Humanität]. Every expression of hope, which proceeds more powerfully from great works of art, even in an age when they fall silent, than from inherited theological texts, is configured with the human [Menschlichen]; nowhere more unequivocally then in moments of Beethoven. (Adorno 1973, 397, translation modified)

Like the essay in comparison to Cartesian method, the utter humane subjectivity of Beethoven represents a more objective stance than the methodological rigor of Bach. This, however, is of course not an argument for a crude restoration of metaphysics in and through subjectivity. It is rather a way to express the predicament that haunts the standard scheme of a successive rational and progressive demythologization of theology into metaphysics and then of metaphysics into science. That standard scheme will inevitably lead into a new form of mythology, and it therefore expresses the dialectic of enlightenment. The humane in the metaphysical, in Beethoven’s subjectivity, is then a secret and paradoxical sign of the theological promise of freedom. In this sense, metaphysics is more true than theology. However, against all rationalism, it is only true by virtue of the theological promise, and this leads Adorno to yet a series of paradoxical formulations.

To this we are forced by the idea of truth, supreme among the metaphysical ideas. The one who believes in God cannot believe in him. The possibility for which the divine name stands is preserved, rather, by the one who does not believe. If the ban of images once extended to the utterance of the name, then, in this form it has itself evoked suspicions of superstition. The ban has been exacerbated: to even think of hope transgresses it and works against it.

So deeply has history sunk into the metaphysical truth, which in vain denies history, the progressive demythologization. It devours itself as the mythical gods liked to devour their children. Leaving behind nothing but what merely is, demythologization recoils into the myth. For myth is nothing else than the closed system of immanence of that which is. This contradiction is what metaphysics has now coalesced into. A thinking that tries to remove the contradiction is everywhere threatened by untruth. (Adorno 1973, 401–402, translation modified)

Music as Secularized Prayer

To sum up a few things – and to end with an explicit comment on the headline of this text “music as secularized prayer” – it must first be concluded from the last quotation that Adorno’s philosophy of music is intimately related to his general attempt to recreate a secondary metaphysical discourse that stubbornly dwells in the contradictoriness and opacity of modern life.

The contradictoriness of life is theologically conceived at the outset, but the truth that may emerge through music and art is neither revelatory nor salvific in any straightforward sense. Music, as a non-language, presents us with an ambiguous model of what intentionless name-language could have been, had such a language not been impossible.10 However,

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10In an essay about the performative aspect of Adorno’s thought, I have tried to elaborate on the details of Adorno’s dialectic between possibility and impossibility. See Martinson (2014).
precisely as non-language, music is still a structure of Sprachähnlichkeit in which this contradiction takes radical expression, although not as signification, nor with a clear intention. Adorno claims that “intentions stream into it. Time and again music points to the fact that it signifies something, something definite. Only the intention is veiled” (Adorno 2002a, 114, translation modified).

As intention-less language, music points to a kind of standstill in which language no longer has to accomplish anything. Given the background in Benjamin’s Sprachtheologie, this standstill is also a utopia of all language: to dwell in a passive receptivity and represent things in their absolute fullness. This is not communicative rationality in the Habermasian sense; in fact it is quite the opposite (compare with Bowie 2007, 323). But it is still a linguistic rationality, capturing the promise that language gives by being more than words and communication.

In the contradictoriness of late modern society, however, this theological utopia cannot be maintained without the explicit denial of a theological solution, mediated by the traditions of revelatory immediacy, that is, in religious traditions that claim linguistic access to a non-contradictory reality – hence Adorno’s sharpening of the ban of images. In their joint book, Dialectic of Enlightenment, Max Horkheimer and Adorno included a chapter of drafts and sketches. In a short draft about language’s unholy entanglement with power, they end up with the following enigmatic proposal: “Invocation of the sun is idolatry. Only the spectacle of the tree withered in its [the sun’s] heat gives a presentiment of the majesty of the day which will not scorch the world on which it shines” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 182).

I take this complex image to represent a kind of belief in God upheld by someone who does not believe. According to Adorno, philosophy has to proceed in this labyrinthine way not to violate the radicalized ban of images. But the case seems to be a bit different with music. Freed from the burden of being true in the linguistic sense, its linguistic structure maintains an alternative model for openness to truth that necessarily runs into untruth. Given the Benjaminian background, this conclusion is wholly congenial with one of Adorno’s most succinct aesthetic aphorisms in Minima Moralia: “Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth” (Adorno 1985, 222).

Adorno’s elaborated philosophy of music is indeed aware of the possibility of untruth in the musical sphere, in line with this aphorism. What I claim is not that music becomes a substantial salvific alternative – that would be a ridiculous claim. When Adorno discusses twelve-tone technique in his Philosophy of New Music, for instance, he rather displays why music can be seen as something that bursts open a space for truth without ever coming to truth in any discursive sense. The answer is that music in this technical domain incorporates the contradiction in its own musical logic.

Music, thrall to historical dialectic, participates in this dialectic. Twelve-tone technique is truly its fate. It subjugates music by setting it free. The subject rules over the music by means of a rational system in order to subjugate to this rational system itself. (Adorno 2006a, 54)

It is this dialectic within the musical sphere, within its materiality, that makes it possible for Adorno to claim that music offers a different model of rationality, related more or less directly to Benjamin’s understanding of language’s “internal magic,” in which every created entity communicates with each other (compare with Adorno 1997, 330). In its
autonomy, music takes the form of secularized prayer, which may be a way to express its non-reference to something beyond, transcending in the integral form of the name. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno brings this feature of music in contact with art in general:

> Art succeeds as such transcendence, however, only in that it says nothing but what it says by virtue of its own elaboration, through its immanent process. The element that in art resembles language is its mimetic element; it only becomes universally eloquent in the specific impulse, by its opposition to the universal. The paradox that art says it and at the same time does not say it, is because the mimetic element by which it says it, the opaque and the particular, at the same time resists speaking. (Adorno 1997, 204)

More concretely and technically understood, music as secularized prayer can be decoded as follows: beyond intentional subjectivity, authentic music incorporates the radicalized ban of images in an opaque interior practice of divine naming. This way of putting things explains why heteronomous, commercial music is such an utter disgrace for Adorno, and why he regarded explicitly religious music as blasphemous. To approach music as secularized prayer is to carefully detach it from all its external ties to the necessities of the capitalist society, including religious longing, in order to see all the ties to this society, which is sedimented in music’s internal structure. Music giving itself up to its wholly other becomes the precondition for a reflection on music that returns it to its social context and to the political question of freedom and unfreedom in modern society.

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**Notes on contributor**

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**References**


