Current of Music
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Second Salvage: Prolegomenon to a Reconstruction of *Current of Music*

Another way to say the search for reality is to say the desire for completion.
Clifford Odets

The centenary proceedings in celebration of T. W. Adorno’s birth in 2003 were a lugubrious display internationally, but most of all in Germany. There the event was headed up by a harness of three heavily shod biographies trudging in decade-long synchronization toward the publishing occasion, as if the goal were to make sure that no detail of Adorno’s life went untrampled. Even Adorno’s writing table and chair, in simulacra, were dragged into the Frankfurt ceremonies. Encased in a silicone cube, these mundane furnishings were established as a national treasure to be visited on *Adornoplatz* in hometown perpetuum. Suhrkamp Publishers and the Goethe Institute, working closely with a restaffed and now corporate-minded Adorno Archiv, distributed so absolute a mass of memento, chronology, and photograph – the known antipodes to Adorno’s philosophy itself – that even under scrutiny it was often hard to decide whether the topic was the writing of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or the framing of the *Magna Carta*. The jubilee successfully portrayed the life of the man as if in a single stride he stepped from crib to garlanded tomb, where the philosophy itself was put to rest. The biographical preoccupation, undermining the
philosophy, finally undermined the biographical as well. Thus, one result of these centenary achievements is that now every next mention of Adorno’s life only helps steal away from the dictum that ‘Life does not live’ any sense that the apprehension ever troubled the person who made the dictum the frontispiece to *Minima Moralia*.

This bears directly on the intention of this essay to provide a first introduction to *Current of Music*. For, as is to be explained, Adorno left the manuscripts for this work in fragmentary condition; what is conceptually valuable in them now depends in part on reconstruction. An assumption of this reconstruction has been that, when a work is abandoned in fragments, reference to the life that left them behind can legitimately provide transitions to potentiate tensions of thought that, deprived of their final shaping efforts, would otherwise dissipate. Certainly this assumption might have been more naïvely pursued prior to the centenary year. The only alternative now – for this introduction in any case – is to look the situation in the face and acknowledge that what is biographical in the transitions established here to provision *Current of Music* with a degree of tensed coherence has recently been woven into something milled out by the mile, with no end in sight. Perhaps in this recognition, what is now lifeless, with the feel of having never lived, will at least half speak of this situation rather than further compound the recently achieved inertness.

New York City, 1938–1941

In 1937, T. W. Adorno had been living in England for three years, having fled National Socialism. Although he was formerly a Privatdozent – an independent lecturer – in philosophy at the University of Frankfurt, the Nazis had deprived him of the right to teach, and the hardship of immigration had set him back to the status of a student at work on a dissertation, a critique of Husserlian phenomenology. He was obliged to hope that a DPhil, taken at Oxford, in addition to his PhD, would provide the over qualification that an immigrant would minimally need to secure a position at a British university. In October, however, a telegram from Max Horkheimer caused him to revise these plans. Horkheimer had for some time wanted to bring Adorno to New York City, and the telegram proposed the means if Adorno were interested in participating in the Princeton Radio Research Project, a study supported by a Rockefeller Foundation grant under the direction of the sociologist and Austrian émigré Paul Lazarsfeld. The next day Adorno wired back his readiness to accept the position, but the decision was hardly made without ambivalence. On one hand, Adorno saw that catastrophe was inevitable in Europe; he had no real
expectation of securing academic employment in prewar England; and his wife, Gretel, who was ill, found the English climate hard to tolerate, and it was hoped she might recover in the United States. But now that his plans to depart had become reality and, ‘contrary to all expectation’, imminent, Adorno expressed in a letter of 27 November to Walter Benjamin what had all along weighed most against the decision. ‘Uppermost’ – Adorno wrote – were his thoughts on Benjamin himself, and in this one word he lodged his distress as poignantly as possible between two men who after a decade of close involvement still addressed one another formally, as Sie. If Benjamin would realize, Adorno continued – emphasizing this uppermost of their friendship with a circumlocution of the greatest urgency for anyone as utterly familiar as was Benjamin with what Adorno held dearest – that second on his mind was that parting meant ‘the real possibility of never seeing my mother again’, Benjamin would be able to ‘imagine how I feel about’ the decision to leave. But, Adorno explained, he could not refuse Horkheimer’s proposal. He had been assured that fully half his time would be devoted to the Institute for Social Research, then affiliated with Columbia University, and collaboration on projects that he and Horkheimer had long envisioned, most of all a study of dialectical materialism. By early January, Adorno had met in Paris with Lazarsfeld, and by late that month had submitted to him a lengthy memorandum outlining his research plans. On 26 February 1938, Adorno and his wife arrived on the steamship Champlain in New York City harbour. Adorno would remain in New York City until November 1941, when – without renewed funding for his position at the Princeton Radio Research Project – he would again be compelled to move in order to secure his proximity to Horkheimer, who had decided to go on to Los Angeles, where his own fragile health, and the institute’s finances as well, could be better maintained. Adorno would not return to Germany until 1949, having spent almost one-quarter of his life as a refugee, a portion of that as an American citizen. He did not embrace German citizenship again until 1955.

Written in English

In his fifteen years as a refugee, T. W. Adorno wrote several major works, including Dialectic of Enlightenment (with Max Horkheimer, 1947), Philosophy of New Music (1949), and Minima Moralia (1951). Their dates of publication belie the years demanded by each of these seminal German texts that no doubt received Adorno’s most decisive conceptual energies. Yet, in addition to these and numerous other projects, Adorno in the same period also produced a substantial body of
research written in English. The latter are distinctly secondary works from the perspective of the oeuvre as a whole but are nevertheless, in their own terms, of considerable interest. Among these writings in English are *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas’s Radio Addresses* (1943) and *The Authoritarian Personality* (with Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, 1950). *Current of Music* was the working title that Adorno proposed on various occasions for a volume that would have assembled the majority of the research that he completed during his first four years in the United States while affiliated with Lazarsfeld in New York City. The texts conceived under this title – comprising several thousand pages – constitute far and away Adorno’s most extensive work in English.

Yet Adorno did not succeed in his own lifetime in publishing this work whose topic and language were adopted under compulsion in the land to which its author fled. The study itself was rejected by a series of editors in the United States and was ultimately left incomplete among the many materials housed at the Adorno Archiv in Frankfurt. This essay intends to explain what Adorno meant to achieve in the book and why his efforts failed. It should be remarked at the outset, however, that this introduction in no way seeks pathos in defence of a work lost to history, as if deserving in reconstruction the rank of texte maudit or Bürgerschreck, for it is neither. If passages of *Current of Music* – both published and unpublished – did once antagonize and have the capacity to raise hackles again, it was not only ill will and happenstance that got in its way but just as much and more the work’s own deficiencies. It is in full cognizance of the limits of these writings that *Current of Music* is now to be imagined into existence. This requires broad recognition and explanation of the complex situation in which this work in its many parts was written. In alliance with its own thinking, however, this reconstruction is certainly not undertaken here with the intention of setting the past back on its feet like a Golem conjured to walk the streets of another millennium, but rather by wanting to spark what is significant in that past when it is known self-consciously from the perspective of the present.

**Music, electricity, and cultural hunger**

The current of *Current of Music* is electricity. In the 1920s and still in the early 1930s, electricity had yet to be used on a vast scale for the reproduction of musical sound. The technology of radio transmission had been developed during World War I in the United States by a government that, in need of reliable means of communication with its European troops, seized by eminent domain the patents and work of
private inventors. Only in the following decades was this technology exploited for the literal capacity evident in Adorno’s electrical metaphor – the current that powers radio – to produce music in streams and even floods of sound across any quantity of space simultaneously.\(^6\) The desire to receive this *current of music* produced the early momentum in radio sales: where only ten thousand families owned sets in 1922, 27 million families – out of 32 million in the United States – owned sets by 1939.\(^7\)

If it is easily imagined that the introduction of radio music would motivate the rapid distribution of the device, it is not as easily guessed that a large proportion of the music heard in the United States on those radios was art music of the European classical tradition. Many stations broadcast live classical music exclusively: in 1921, for instance, the Chicago station KYW broadcast ‘all performances of the Chicago Civic Opera, afternoon and evening, six days a week – and nothing else’.\(^8\) WQXR in New York City played classical music 80 per cent of the time and in the other 20 per cent talked primarily about it and the other arts. The more expensive radio sets were themselves advertised as having been built for distinguished music; they were fine ‘instruments’ that the listener faced as they ‘played’ and the listener was expected to be interested in its proper ‘tuning’. No less a figure than Leopold Stokowski gave instruction for bringing the equipment up to pitch: ‘In tuning-in on the wave length desired there is a central point of maximum clarity and truth of reception.’\(^9\) The skill of ‘perfect tuning’ was extolled as an optimal capacity, akin to perfect pitch. Radio stations that transmitted serious music portrayed themselves as conservatories: ‘A visit to station WMAQ [in Chicago] is like entering a music conservatory. You enter a reception room . . . then on into the studio . . . artistically furnished in brown tones . . . here and there, a large fern . . . and a Mason and Hamlin grand piano.’\(^10\)

This image of early radio devoted in significant proportion to European art music might prompt an enduringly fixed and real resentment in contemporary American readers, as if that was a moment when high still thought it could lord it over low. But in the early and genuinely class-conscious decades of American radio, when questions of the equitable redistribution of wealth and privilege were actually discussed – as they now are not – and an end was sought to much openly acknowledged resentment, the broadcast of European art music was a model of possible democratization. Contrary to what might be guessed at today, the distinction between *popular* and *classical* was loosely synonymous with what in those decades was discerned as the distinction between *light* – or *light popular* – and *serious* music. In the manuscripts of *Current of Music* Adorno himself regularly deals with these two sets
of categories as being easily interchangeable in the assumptions of the age. The significance of this is in what the now mostly forgotten pair light and serious music contributed to the synonymity. The distinction it drew indicates that the idea of amusement had not yet subordinated music entirely. Although the exclusivity of music as amusement was ascendant, a contrary seriousness of listening was commonly acknowledged as legitimate and valued. When high and low were invoked, the thinking involved was complex in a way that is now unfamiliar, since in the minds of many what was high was often valued as what ought to become the possession of all.

The evidence for this goes far beyond what can be derived from sets of terms. For the idea of culture itself had not yet suffered the catastrophic implication of World War II; culture was still thought to be a human privilege marked by, but no less distinguishable from, class privilege. When – for instance – Barnett Newman ran for mayor of New York in 1933, his manifesto was titled, ‘On the Need for Political Action by Men of Culture’. If his candidacy stood in minority and beleaguered opposition, he all the same had enough support to write confidently that ‘culture is the foundation of not only our present society, but of all our hopes for all future societies to come.’11 This was characteristic of the expression of democratically minded individuals and institutions of various kinds and – in the ‘red decade’ – especially those many on the wide spectrum of the left who readily encouraged and fought for the broad distribution of art music. In Manhattan, for instance, the City Center for Music and Drama was established by the city government in alliance with trade union organizations to present symphony, ballet, and opera inexpensively to working-class audiences. The center was vigorously capable of supporting its own ballet and opera companies. In its own day, when the accomplishments of the City Center were discussed, its success was generally acknowledged not in terms of bringing high to low but in the fact that unlike the Metropolitan Opera, which was segregated, its opera house was not.12

Radio was acknowledged above all other institutions in this period as having the pre-eminent capacity to universalize performances of a human culture that was previously restricted to the wealthy. Its diffusion was civic policy. In 1937, New York’s mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, appeared on what was then the city’s proudly municipally owned radio station, WNYC – then under the directorship of the former head of the Socialist Worker’s League Morris Novik, whom La Guardia had appointed – to comment as a ‘music lover’ on Beethoven. The mayor provided ‘little stories about all the composers represented on the program and the music being played . . . He had the appearance of a man tackling an important job with great
earnestness.' It only makes the same point to note here, with the mention of Morris Novik, that it was his office that two years later would engage Adorno in plans to present a lecture series as a citywide educational introduction to modern music on Sunday afternoons, the station’s most listened-to hours. Although those plans were only partly realized, their existence is representative of a forward-looking orientation to radio and music that could not now be conceived on a major American radio station.

In these first decades of radio, those who had hopes for it expected it to wipe away the stigma of class privilege borne by art music, and this expectation met with success. As one commentator observed, ‘Until the past few years such music was the rather expensive privilege of the inhabitants of a few large cities.’ This observation was confirmed by statistics assembled in the late 1930s and reported in a 1938 article in Harper’s Monthly Magazine: for though quantitatively all economic classes listened more to light music than to serious music, as a result of radio a majority of Americans, African American and white, came to like and listen to serious music. Four-fifths of the homes in the nation heard at least one symphonic or operatic broadcast a week. Even in rural areas, where radio most dramatically changed life but where interest in classical music was predictably less than in cities, there were stations such as WOI in Ames, Iowa – much studied by the Princeton Radio Research Project – that combined farm news and market reports with its most popular programme, The Music Shop, a daily broadcast of short symphonic pieces, chamber music, and music education. These broadcasts were especially directed to ‘the farmer’s wife’, who, as Adorno mentions repeatedly in Current of Music, became a mythically invoked figure in discussions of radio’s democratizing cultural potential. The invention of radio, it was said, would enable her to go about her household chores while attending Carnegie Hall and the Philharmonic gratis alongside the well heeled and mink clad. And in some regions of the country this mythical intention found reality. A characteristic letter from a female listener to WOI reads: ‘The more I hear good music, such as you give us, the more I love it, and the more I hear that kind the more I dislike the other kind.’ What rings of another age in this woman’s comment is the apparently naive desire for self-improvement to be gained through familiarity with music held to be objectively superior. It is to be emphasized that she figures here as part of a movement. A now discredited idea of culture implicitly provided individuals such as herself with a critical stance toward their own perceptions and directed them with substantial expectation toward the promise of radio. Again, in the voice of Harper’s: ‘Millions are haunted by such
feelings of hunger for learning, for acquiring new arts, for self-improvement. And radio today makes an earnest effort to satisfy that hunger.¹⁸

**Radio pedagogy**

The *Harper’s* statement vividly insists on the power of radio to nourish an age urgently beset by the need for educational self-improvement. And to rid this hunger, radio institutions of several kinds had been established, including ‘schools of the air’ to which Adorno occasionally refers throughout *Current of Music*. It was possible, for instance, to obtain a ‘broad though simplified education in the arts and sciences . . . by sitting in front of your loudspeaker’ at WNYC’s *School for Listeners* or by following programmes at the University of the Air, broadcast by ‘The Voice of Labor’, the Eugene Debs memorial station WEVD. The latter presented complete classes in history, philosophy, labour, literature, and economics.¹⁹

But the single most significant pedagogical effort by radio in those decades, and in fact the most substantial pedagogical undertaking ever in the history of American broadcast media, the *NBC Music Appreciation Hour*, was a result of the success of radio in making European art music available nationally. It was a programme for the cultivation of musical knowledge and taste, and it is of specific interest here because in *Current of Music* Adorno devotes a lengthy essay to it and conceived the plan of his own educational broadcast in critical relation to it. For more than a decade, from 1928 to 1942, the programme was led by the conductor of the New York Symphony Philharmonic, Walter Damrosch. At its height it was heard weekly as required curriculum throughout the academic year in more than 70,000 schools nationwide, by more than 7 million students.²⁰ Educational materials coordinated with the nationally broadcast concert season in New York City were printed in the hundreds of thousands and distributed to classrooms in yearly editions; teachers received accompanying pedagogical instructions and test blanks to administer. Reviewing the pedagogical achievements of Damrosch’s programme in the context of the reported demographics of national listening habits, even now it is easy to share spontaneously in the expectations widely sensed by many at the time that the interest in serious music produced by radio had led the masses of Americans to the verge of a cultural coming of age. In the words of *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*: ‘A sound and deep appreciation among the masses of our people is growing first in music and will draw after it, but more slowly, a love of the best in the other arts. . . . The American people, in the mass, are at the threshold of a cultural maturity.’²¹