

## **Educating musical imagination**

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My children are crazy about a Danish radio production called *Terkel i knibe*, Terkel in trouble. It takes place in a school class and contains a scene in which the class nerd asks the music teacher: *I was browsing through my grandfather's music encyclopaedia and there I came upon the word funky. What does funky mean?* The teacher is shocked: *Say, kids, music aint for reading or analysing, music is for experiencing and feeling and tasting and dancing.* And then they hit it off in a funk and rap routine about how cool the music teacher is. This music teacher with his page-boy hair and corduroy trousers may seem a left-over from the seventies, but his ideas about music are a very accurate description of the general view of music in the educational system even today. The music teacher is there to make the children sing and play, music is a creative subject, it a thing only for the senses and the adequate approach to music is a non-discursive, non-reflective, spontaneous, lived experience.

In his article *Zur Musikpädagogik* (In *Dissonanzen*, Gesammelte Schriften 14, p. 108-126) Adorno criticizes this view. He is not directly concerned with the problems of teaching music to a school class. His point of departure is children who take music lessons to learn to play an instrument. And the music he talks about is the traditional repertory of art music that is handed down in musical notation. Why anybody should learn to play and understand such music is, according to Adorno, no longer obvious. It no longer forms an integral or substantial part of our culture. In the days of say Adorno's own childhood it was natural that the children of the bourgeoisie leaned to play the piano or the violin, because the ability to execute a sonata by Beethoven or Mozart had a recognized social function within educated society. (Today the ability to play Beatles melodies on the guitar at parties is to some extent recognized as a social value but not in any substantial way.) The social value of playing Beethoven has disappeared and the musical works of art are no longer objects of understanding but have petrified to cultural goods to be consumed under specific circumstances. Now, to avoid misunderstandings: Adorno is not lamenting the loss of or advocating a return to this educated society. Firstly because he knows that it is irretrievably lost through the historical development, and secondly and more importantly because its education in itself was more than

questionable. His concern is with diagnosing the problems of contemporary music education. Since the goal of music education is no longer unproblematic, music educationalists have to ask themselves to what purpose they are educating, and they seem to have two answers: either we teach playing because it is a funny hobby, and that is that, or we do it with a view to the old-established generally edifying character of music.

Adorno, of course, disagrees. He argues that the goal of music education is neither to edify the character of the students - as it was in antiquity and the mediaeval university - nor to guide them to blind and idle playing and music making. Instead, music education should aim at instructing the students in the language of music and in understanding musical works as works of art with the cognitive values, which Adorno attributes to art. In music education as in philosophy he insists on 'Vorrang des Objekts', the priority of the object, the work of art.

As the primary strategy of music education he talks of educating the musical imagination. Music is both a sensual and a spiritual (*geistig*) thing, like other art it is - as Adorno has it from Hegel - *das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee*, the sensual appearance of the idea. The spiritual content of a work of music can only be recognised through the most accurate sensual perception. The medium for perceiving this tension between the sensual and the spiritual aspect of music is the musical imagination. By musical imagination he primarily means the ability to imagine with ones inner ear a notated piece of music so accurately as if it were actually being played. His ideal is that you should be able to read a musical score mutely the way you read a normal book. This of course is a very high ideal. But the relationship between notation and playing is crucial to the understanding of art music. Works of music in the traditional repertory exist in two ways: as sounding objects and as notated texts. And the notation has two aspects: it is both the way the work exists objectively and directions of how it is to be executed. Musical texts, so Adorno puts it, are both manifestations of something spiritual and instructions for acting. The understanding of this double character should be at the core of music education. The musical imagination should enable the student to imagine what the notation means; that is both to understand it as an instruction and transform it into musical action and to imagine what it means as something spiritual. And this part of the imagination is also relevant to the listener who should also be conscious that music is more than a collection of sounding phenomena and be able to imagine what they mean as a totality.

Adorno criticizes the musical *Erlebniss*, the subjective or 'lived' experience of music as an ephemeral and inadequate approach. He follows Hegel in insisting on *Erfahrung*, the objective, interpretative experience, which absorbs itself in the work and ignores its subjective effects as

something coincidental. As he puts in the *Aesthetic Theory: The experience of art as the experience of its truth or untruth is more than a subjective experience: it is the break-through of objectivity in the subjective consciousness.*

In classicist, Aristotelian theory of art the experience of art is supposed to bring about catharsis, the outlet and purification of the affects in the soul. Adorno doubts that it takes place at all; art is rather used as a surrogate satisfaction, while the real instincts and passions are repressed. But even if the purification should take place, it is only a means of oppression, a piece of psychic hygiene that society desires in order that the individuals may execute their social functions undisturbed by irrational instincts.

Against subjective experience and catharsis Adorno sets his concept of *Erschütterung*, shock. The normal subjective experience uses the work of art as a release for the subject's own feelings, and therefore it just throws the recipient back on himself. And far from being pure and spontaneous this experience is determined by the cultural industry, which teaches the individuals - behind their backs - to react in prescribed patterns to specific aesthetic stimuli. Adorno's concept of shock is what may be termed as a higher or second spontaneity. It is not reached by letting go of the subject but by straining it enormously, through concentration and reflection. It is an un-mediated experience reached on the other side of and through mediation.

This mediation must take a form, which is generally seen as the direct opposite of experience, namely analysis. Music seems to be the least rational form of art, and especially in connection with music analysis is often considered to be directly destructive to experience. This is partly because the bourgeois ideology of art wants art and music in particular to be an asylum for feelings and irrationality that should not be disturbed by reason, partly because of the indisputable fact that much music analysis may very well be said to block the approach to a work of music. Music analysis so often contents itself with subsuming specific works of music under general, abstract patterns and forms, e.g. the typical dissection of sonata movements in main theme, second theme, bridge section and the like. This kind of analysis was firmly ridiculed by G. B. Shaw at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it is still in use everywhere. Arnold Schönberg justly criticized analysis for only asking how a work of art was made instead of asking what it is. Adorno, however, does not want to overcome these limitations of analysis with less analysis but with more! A typical figure in Adorno. Instead of understanding the work of music in its generality analysis must delve deeper and seek to determine how each individual musical moment functions in the totality. In his book on Alban Berg

he calls this a sort of reversed compositional process that begins with the result and absorbs itself both in the totality and the microstructure of the work.

In the article on music education he writes:

From the beginning the student should be taught to try to understand whatever he meets in the music he plays from its function in the object, from its constructive value. Such analysis must not take the character of outer-musical reflection, but should be kept in purely musical terms: for every tone, every rest, every motive, every phrase it is possible to indicate to what purpose they are there, and reversibly every total form is to be determined from the dynamic interaction of its elements.

This sort of analysis must be adapted to the level of understanding of the student, but one should begin with it much earlier than the educational system, which cultivates a music theory apart from the works, and treats it in such a way, that the relationship between the theoretical concepts and the actual works does not become clear.

So far, so good. This seems an excellent ideal of music education, but still a very high ideal that one might find it hard to put into practice in a normal school curriculum. It requires time enough to acquaint the student with a rather profound knowledge of music theory, it applies more to the amateur performer than to the listener, and it is so obviously bound to the traditional art music, which Adorno himself points out is not necessarily relevant at all. But the omni-presence of music today - which is radically different from Adorno's situation in the 1950s - makes it all the more necessary to give the listeners an ability to relate to music at a level above the mere registration of sensual stimuli. It is more necessary than ever to make people understand that music is something objective to be understood objectively. The musical imagination is necessary also for those who are only interested in rock music, which is also something more than just sensual for all its self-proclaimed spontaneity. How then to sharpen the sensual perception, how educate the imagination without reading scores, how to make children see that music is more than sound here and subjective feelings there?

I would suggest starting at a place that would have been anathema to Adorno. You could start out with the music for classic cartoons, or, to be more specific, with Scott Bradley's brilliant and funny music for the classic Tom and Jerry movies. This music is, of course, justly subject to all the criticism that Horkheimer and Adorno applied to the cultural industry in general and specifically to cartoons. It is an industrial exploitation of Richard Wagner's technique of composing scenic gestures that was handed down to film music through the music of Richard Strauss. But as the Salvation Army knows so well, it is smart to bring your message out with music people know, and the cartoon music is a kind of music that is drilled into every child, and which can easily be

demonstrated to be more than just pleasing organised sound. Its function as the definer of tempo and character of a scene is obvious; it mimes the gestures and actions of the protagonists and gives expression to their feelings and passions.

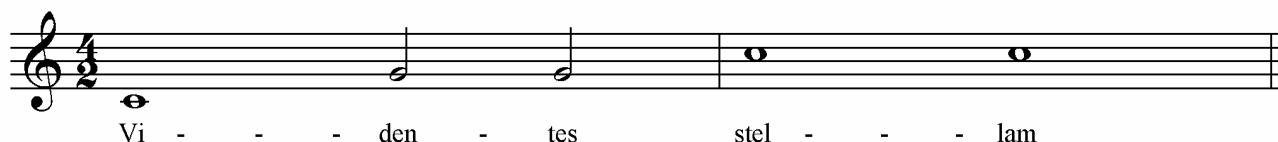
In art music, this mimesis, this transformation of action and passions into music add to a deeper, more specific characterisation of a dramatic situation. The more specific this characterisation, the more universal the scene may become, like for instance the fare-well scene in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, which is at once a unique scene in a unique opera and the epitome of fare-well scenes.

In cartoon music the mimesis only doubles the action and relates a specific situation to a general topic of comedy, the well-known situations of having your butt kicked, your tail set on fire or your teeth bashed in. On the other hand, when well made like Scott Bradley's, it is also very witty, and this in itself is a spiritual aspect of music that transcends the sensual. (The fact that Adorno and Horkheimer were severely critical of the fun of cartoons we must leave for another lecture). Secondly, if it were not for the fact that the reactions to cartoons and cartoon music were drilled into us so as to become second nature, the translation of gesture into music and the understanding of such translation would seem to require a highly developed musical imagination. Think for instance of the way we talk about high and low in music. This relies on the plausible but by no means natural convention that we call tones of many oscillations high and tones of few low. We then put the tones in ascending order in scales, steps or stairs, and through these theoretical operations we arrive at the basis for depicting upward and downward movement in tones. That things, actions and feelings may be depicted in tones relies on both a spontaneous imagination and the - conscious or unconscious - understanding of a set of conventions.

These conventions are fully developed in Wagner, but he was not the one who invented them. Neither was the Joseph Haydn of the cartoon depictions of snake, lion, insects, light and thunderstorm in the oratorio *The Creation*. For the origins of these conventions we must go to another place where Adorno would not go himself: to the religious vocal music of the mediaeval, renaissance, and baroque eras. Adorno in the article on music education recommends the singing of secular madrigals to counter the overwhelming repertory of religious music. He did not know or understand religious music, probably because he was too busy criticising the - admittedly - terrible ideology of the German Jugendmusik and Singbewegung, the movements for collective singing that advocated it. And yet it is strange that Adorno should have had no ear for Christian music, since his writings in other respects show a profound though of course critical understanding of theology. It is

a pity since it both hampers his understanding of Bach and Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, but also because this music fits his views on art and in many instances could underscore his points. But we do not need Adorno's sanction to work with church music. And I do not of course recommend it for its religious or moral values but for its artistic truth the same way that Adorno would recommend Beethoven's Ninth.

A famous motet by Orlando di Lasso is called [\*Videntes stellam\*](#). It is an epiphany motet with a text from St. Matthew on the adoration of the magi, the three wise men from the orient. As in all works from this time the text is divided into sections, which are rendered in music in sections of different motives. The first words *Videntes stellam*, meaning 'when they saw the star', sound like this:



It is a very simple motive consisting of two consecutive rising intervals of a fifth and a fourth which together make up an octave. But though simple, it is a striking depiction of the wise men looking up from the earth (the deepest note) to the star in heaven, the top note. The top note is the octave that frames the scale the same way heaven frames the earth. The musical conceit is on the one hand simple and straightforward, cartoon-like in its clarity, naïve or even trivial. Once you see it, you might think: is that all it takes? On the other hand, it also relies on a metaphorical use of the not quite so trivial symbolic values of music theory. Thirdly, the motive is not just stated once but makes up the basic structure of an intricate five part polyphonic progression that makes artistic sense in purely musical terms without any symbolic superstructure. And fourthly, the tone painting is not merely a doubling of the text; it is an added dimension. The text nowhere tells anything about how the magi saw the star, only that they saw it. The how that the music relates is di Lasso's interpretation, which because it is set forth with so simple and plausible means strikes us as being authentic. This motet, like myriads of others, abounds in this kind of imagery, at once simple and subtle. The words that 'on seeing the child their joy was great', is set to a bouncing motive that suggests that they actually jumped up and down and danced for joy. And when they fall down to worship baby Jesus, the music almost comes to a total standstill in long-held, full chords of great austerity, a more subtle picture of the prostrate kings before the Virgin Mary and the child.

I am afraid that the interpretation we will now hear is somewhat conservative and restrained. Many of the niceties of the musical allegory are lost in the shining, blank sound of the boy's choir. But unfortunately the more expressionist rendering by the Esrum-Hellerup Choir is not available on CD.

This kind of music does not give much food for sentiment or subjective experience, unless of course you are given to being sentimental over the mere sound of the 'oh so innocent' boy's choir. It can only be appreciated if one tries to understand the allegorical meaning of each motive. And this calls for the musical imagination. You have to try to imagine the picture that the composition is painting. Thus the interpretation of a work like this would seem an object lesson of objective aesthetic experience.

Around 1900 the German musicologist Hermann Kretschmar set forth his idea of musical hermeneutics, a theory of interpretation that was based on the baroque 'Affektenlehre' and 'Figurenlehre', theories of affect and musical rhetorical figures. The 'Affektenlehre' was a quasi-scientific codification of the conventions of musical allegory accumulated since the dawn of Western polyphony. Many of Kretschmar's interpretations - presented in his influential *Führer durch den Konzertsaal* - are interesting but unconvincing. They are flawed by the fact that although he was conscious of the historical roots of his theory, he thought that its principles were universally applicable, which of course they are not. You cannot interpret Brahms with a theory of passions from the time of Bach. All music psychology is questionable, so Adorno in the *Philosophy of New Music*, because music is something historical that knows no natural law. Any constancy of the psychological perception of music would require that the human subject itself was constant, whereas it actually is given to historic change and development.

I do not propose a revival of Kretschmar's hermeneutics. And I do not claim that insights in the workings of a motet by di Lasso necessarily further the understanding of a work by Schönberg or a heavy metal number. But I would contend that the allegorical aspect of music that is so easy to recognise in di Lasso is in fact an aspect of all music. To quote once more the *Philosophy of New Music: Music constitutes itself as a bearer of meaning, it has its being in being more than just tone.* In later music, the absolute instrumental music of the bourgeois era for instance, this meaning cannot be interpreted so heavy-handedly as the cartoon allegory of the rhetorical vocal music of the renaissance and the baroque. It eludes definition, remains, as Adorno would say a constant riddle. But the spiritual content of any work of art constantly calls for deciphering; and where music is concerned this is the task for the musical imagination.

This was an indication of a possible way to awaken musical imagination without teaching everybody to play the piano. People coming from other musical traditions than myself may suggest other ways, but it is through this imagination that the subject may reach that stage of higher spontaneity, which Adorno calls *Erschütterung*, *shock*. The shock, the feeling, as he says, that the floor is disappearing under you, occurs when through and beyond reflection and analysis the subject is able to lose itself in a work of art, to entrust itself to the will of the work (and not to the feelings it may release in the subject). In this process the subject recognizes the work of art as something totally different, something outside the subject itself. In Adorno's famous reading of the legend of Ulysses and the Sirens he shows that the rational subject is confined within itself as in a prison. It has a constant obligation of keeping itself together, of self-preservation, and in order to fulfill this obligation it must suppress its instincts and passions. Confronted with the sublime qualities of a musical work of art and not tied to the mast like Ulysses, the subject can recognize its own limitations and for a moment look beyond its own prison walls and perceive the possibility of giving up self-preservation. To the subject, art is a spokesman for suppressed nature. Art is critical towards the very principle of the subject, which Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* identified as the internal agent of domination. In *Minima moralia* Adorno says that the purpose of art is to bring chaos into order. Adorno has grave doubts about the moral value of music education. When fully perceived with all its cognitive values a musical work is not edifying but disturbing, and it can only be used for moral education or for therapeutic purposes if one ignores its cognitive truth and only looks towards what he calls the psychologically regressive elements of music.

The ideal, ultimate goal of music education is to help students to grasp the critical and liberating potentials of music as art. Its goal is to shock people.