

# Trading Fours

A Contemporary Approach to Jazz and  
Adorno's Aesthetic Theory

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[I]n all music that deserves the name of art, every detail, even the simplest, would be itself; none would be arbitrarily interchangeable. Where traditional music does not meet this requirement it is not sufficient unto itself, not even if it carries the most famous signatures.<sup>1</sup>

– Adorno, 1976

The image shows a musical score for a trumpet (Tpt.) and piano (Pno.) duo. The tempo is marked "Adagio, Rubato" and the time signature is 4/4. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The trumpet part begins with a quarter note G4, followed by eighth notes A4, B4, C5, and D5, then a triplet of eighth notes E5, F5, and G5, and finally a half note G5 with a fermata. The piano part begins with a dynamic marking of *f* (forte) and a tremolo on the right hand, followed by a dynamic marking of *mp* (mezzo-piano). The piano accompaniment consists of chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand.

– Avishai Cohen and Yonathan Avishai,  
“The Opening” (2019) at 01:13

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 29.



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# Introduction

“Three Fragments from Wozzeck” op. 7 by the Viennese composer Alban Berg premièred in Frankfurt in 1924. It was then, that Adorno met Berg, a student of Schoenberg and one of the most famous composers of the Second Viennese School, and decided to study composition in Vienna for a period of about a year. Adorno immersed himself in what today is regarded as one of the most important avant-garde scenes of classical composition. Adorno himself in this period was mainly focused on composing, rather than philosophical writing and he composed several pieces already strictly adhering to the twelve-tone technique.<sup>2</sup> In the years after his composition studies in Vienna, Adorno returned to Frankfurt and became more focussed on philosophy.

In 1934, at the age of 30, Adorno left Weimar Germany and settled in Oxford. This is where he wrote one of the essays that is central to his critique of jazz: “On Jazz” in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, which followed on an earlier publication of an essay called “Farewell to Jazz” in the *Europäische Revue*.<sup>3</sup> During the Nazi era Adorno would move to New York City, where the Institute for Social Research had been relocated under supervision of Horkheimer, and to Los Angeles, ironically situated in the vicinity of Hollywood, the beating heart of the culture industry that he started to criticize in the same period. After his return to post-war Europe, Adorno would continue to write about the sociology of music, aesthetic

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno “Three Piano Pieces (in strict twelve-tone technique)” (1927) is, as the name suggests, an exercise in composing strictly in the twelve-tone technique (dodecaphonic). Earlier works such as “Two Pieces for String Quartet” op. 2 (1924/1925) are not dodecaphonic, but are ‘atonal’. Although it must be said Adorno himself did not approve the use of this word. All compositions by Adorno are collected in Theodor W. Adorno, *Kompositionen*, ed. Maria L. Lopez-Vito and Ulrich Krämer (München: Edition Text+ Kritik, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “On Jazz,” trans. Jamie O. Daniel, *Discourse* 12, no. 1 (1989): 45-69. Originally published as Rottweiler, Hektor (pseud.), “Über Jazz,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5, (1937): 235-259; Theodor W. Adorno, “Abschied vom Jazz,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. XVIII, 1984, 711–16. Originally in *Europäische Revue* 9, (1933): 313-316.

theory and the culture industry. His final magnum opus *Aesthetic Theory* was first published unfinished and posthumously in 1970.<sup>4</sup>

The first time I came over Adorno was in grammar school, where I was part of a large-scale reproduction of the 1967 Off-Broadway musical *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, which is something of a romantic love story combined with hippie music and protests against the Vietnam war. My philosophy teacher took the liberty of showing me an interview by Adorno in which he comments:

I have to say that when somebody sets himself up, and for whatever reason sings maudlin music about Vietnam being unbearable, I find that really it is this song that is in fact unbearable, in that by taking the horrendous and making it somehow consumable, it ends up wringing something like consumption-qualities out of it.<sup>5</sup>

This line of thought had until then never really occurred to me, but was definitely convincing to some extent on first sight. Unfortunately, we only ever discussed Adorno briefly in grammar school and it would take until now to return to him. In the process of finding a suitable subject for my thesis, I decided that I would like to make a connection with my education as a jazz pianist at the conservatory. Since jazz in the Netherlands is often thought of as an elitist, complex genre for the culturally interested, and sometimes even carries a political commitment in it, I assumed that Adorno would have a favourable assessment of it. I could not have been more wrong: Adorno has written very critically, sometimes cynically with regards to the genre, which made me all the more interested in his philosophy.

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<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, Theodor Adorno on Popular Music and Protest, interviewer unknown, Film, trans. Ricardo Brown, year unknown, [archive.org/details/RicBrownTheodorAdornoonPopularMusicandProtest](https://archive.org/details/RicBrownTheodorAdornoonPopularMusicandProtest). Accessed February 13th 2020.



Adorno's cynicism with regards to jazz music inspires the main problem to be answered in this thesis. My primary aim is to develop a line of argumentation to defend contemporary jazz music against Adorno's critical writings on early jazz music. I will argue against Adorno's claim that all jazz music is an uncritical reproduction of existing material and is inherently corrupted by capitalist society. To do this, a solid and nuanced understanding of Adorno's aesthetic theory is required firstly – more specifically an understanding of the concepts relevant to his philosophy of music and the broader Marxist framework in which they are contextualised. Chapter one presents such an understanding of the relevant concepts and a theoretical framework. In chapter two, I focus in more detail on Adorno's views on jazz music. I develop a sense of the historical context in which Adorno wrote his first articles on jazz and discuss different interpretations of these texts. In the second part of chapter two, I discuss different scholars who oppose Adorno's views on jazz and accuse him of being elitist and ethnocentric. Their main argument is based on the fact that Adorno seems to neglect the Afro-American sociocultural history of the jazz genre. They furthermore attempt to undermine Adorno's critique by formulating a distinction between 'genuine' Afro-American jazz and 'commercial' jazz, supposedly the only type of jazz that Adorno had access to. I argue that this line of argumentation is self-refuting, because it presupposes a kind of cultural essentialism that it tries to criticize in Adorno's writing – a cultural essentialism that also is not reflected in the current global character of jazz music. Conversely, I suggest Adorno's critique of jazz can be best understood within his philosophical framework. Then, the critique appears to be aesthetically constructive, anti-racist and delivers interesting concepts and criteria to evaluate jazz music and engage in a contemporary, critical debate. Finally, in chapter three, I argue that such a distinction between 'genuine' and 'commercial' jazz music can be made, in order to defend jazz music from Adorno's critique, but importantly I attempt to do so in terms of musical aesthetics. This, indeed, requires that an appropriate conception of jazz music is

developed and employed in chapter three, so that the music can be properly evaluated aesthetically.

Dealing with Adorno's texts can be difficult, as they are written in a fragmented fashion. As will be discussed in chapter one, Adorno is critical of rationality and instrumental reason. It would be self-refuting for him to write a well-structured and coherent theory of art and capitalism. As Jay Bernstein writes in his introduction to *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*:

Adorno is seeking after historical truth, not the ahistorical, rational essence of phenomena. Historical truth is 'shown' in fragmentary writing, which does not then explicitly aim to demonstrate or to explain. Explaining and demonstrating neutralize the phenomena in question; to explain is to explain away.<sup>6</sup>

Adorno's fragmentary writing is often immanently quotable, but very difficult to reconstruct in an understandable and truthful way. This problem emerges mostly in chapter one, where some explanations may be limited and require further elaborations or beg unanswered questions. This is inevitable in nearly all writing, and especially so when writing about Adorno, but I hope to be able to refer you to the extensive secondary literature on these topics.

In the quote above, Bernstein is also referring to Adorno's background as a Neo-Marxist. One of the central presuppositions in Adorno's texts on art, is that culture and society are connected in a Marxist sense. They are both dependent on one another, and are both able to influence one another. Given the fact that Adorno has written most of his oeuvre after WWII, it is understandable that art in his view should somehow take its responsibility to critique society in every way possible to prevent another genocide from happening. As we shall see in

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<sup>6</sup> Jay M. Bernstein, "Introduction," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 7.

the coming chapters, art is able to reveal the claim to truth that is made by the dominant ideology in society in terms of aesthetics, as Adorno writes: “The unresolved antagonisms of reality appear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form. This [...] defines art’s relation to society.”<sup>7</sup> Adorno’s starting point in aesthetic theory is thus defined by the assumptions that art should influence society for the better, and that the world is inherently corrupted by instrumental rationality, Enlightenment reasoning, and capitalism. If Adorno had still lived, he presumably would have argued that the same still goes now. This is why Adorno’s aesthetics are still very much an interesting framework to evaluate artistic practises such as contemporary jazz. In this thesis I hope to prove this relevance that Adorno has for the contemporary jazz scene, while also evaluating and critiquing Adorno’s own theory. The result is something of a trade-off, something rather familiar in the traditional jazz scene, where trading solo’s every four bars is appropriately named ‘Trading Fours’.

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<sup>7</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 8.



# 1

## Adorno's Aesthetics And The Culture Industry

Before I evaluate and criticize Adorno's critique of jazz in the following chapters, it is essential to gain a thorough understanding of this critique and the theoretical framework in which it is situated. In this first chapter, my focus is therefore to explain the central concepts of Adorno's aesthetic theory. Primarily I will focus on concepts that are relevant to his philosophy of music and his critique of jazz music. In the first part of this chapter, I explain what it is that Adorno calls 'culture industry', and why he so viciously critiques everything that has to do with it. The focus in the first part lies on the concept of standardization. Next, I develop an understanding of several crucial concepts of Adorno's aesthetic theory. Central to the second part of this chapter is the question what makes art worthwhile, or good in Adorno's view. The focus of this part lies on the concepts of authenticity, structural consistency and critical reflection by art.

### **The Culture Industry and Standardization**

Adorno's critique of the culture industry and of capitalism is part of a broader critique of Enlightenment thinking and of instrumental reason. Central to his Enlightenment critique are the concepts of freedom and autonomy, and their juxtaposition to equality, objectivity and instrumental reason. While the 17th and 18th century philosophy understands a free and autonomous human subject to result from objectivity and equality, Adorno and Horkheimer argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the individual, unique subject is dominated and

subdued by scientific, objective reason instead.<sup>8</sup> In their book they try to explain the apparent contradiction between modern science and its promise to liberate humankind from ignorance, hard labour, and injustice on the one hand, and the WWII reality of fascism, genocide and systematic mass destruction on the other.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, Enlightenment rationality is driven by the fact that “[m]an imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown.”<sup>9</sup> Science functions to remove human fear and replace it with control over nature, which is the equivalent of scientific knowledge, since according to Adorno and Horkheimer we know something only in so far as we can manipulate it.<sup>10</sup> As such, science has created a distinction between humankind and controllable entities in the world. This distinction has resulted in a “domination over non-human nature and over other men” which stands at the very heart of “all civilizing rationality” in capitalist society.<sup>11</sup> The human subject has become both subject and object of instrumental rationality and modern scientific theories, that work through reductionism, distilling general and abstract statements from individual cases. Instrumental rationality thus disregards exactly those properties of objects, that give it their historical and social particularity, for the sake of the abstract and general theory. Instrumental rationality must thus treat unequal things as equal to regard them as one controllable whole; science leaves out individual particularities of objects to abstract them. This is why Adorno and Horkheimer often refer to rationality as subsumptive; subsumption then, is “domination in the conceptual realm.”<sup>12</sup> As humans are made object, the human subject is *reduced* to rationally understandable concepts. Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, technological domination and scientific theories inescapably fail to do right to the uniqueness and individuality of the human

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<sup>8</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 2016), 54.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> Jay M. Bernstein, "Introduction," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 4.

subject and nature. Despite the fact that rational theory treats all humans equally through reduction, the scientific approach does not result in a more free or just society.<sup>13</sup> Rather, it brings us alienation from individual subjects and distancing from the true nature of things. “The distance between subject and object, a presupposition of abstraction, is grounded in the distance from the thing itself.”<sup>14</sup> This distance and alienation is what has made the systematic, rationalised genocide in WWII possible, that culminated in Auschwitz. Human existence without fear, but with control and power, comes at the price of mass destruction, fascism and capitalism, because they all represent “alienation from that over which they exercise their power.”<sup>15</sup>

The culture industry too, is part of the process of technological domination of the human subject. The subsumption of the particular under the universal is acquired through the culture industry and capitalism. In the same book, Adorno and Horkheimer provide their first major account on the culture industry. Their aim in the chapter “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” is to demonstrate “the regression of enlightenment to ideology which finds its typical expression in cinema and radio. Here enlightenment consists above all in the calculation of effectiveness and of the techniques of production and distribution.”<sup>16</sup> In the culture industry, all products are homogenous and made through protocol: “culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part.”<sup>17</sup> Culture has integrally become part of capitalist economy, it has become an industry following the same rules of production as any other industry in society. Cultural forms such as cinema, radio, and popular music no longer need to feign being art. “The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify

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<sup>13</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

the rubbish they deliberately produce.”<sup>18</sup> Adorno fragmentarily describes what is typical to the products produced in the culture industry. These products are manufactured for consumption by the masses and largely define this consumption; products are made by the culture industry according to a structured plan.<sup>19</sup> Adorno emphasizes that the culture industry is not popular art, in a sense that it is art or mass culture that arises from the masses themselves. The masses are object of the culture industry and their taste is adjusted accordingly, so that they maintain a role of consuming culture produced by the culture industry. Culture becomes a tool of capitalism to economize the leisure time of the working class. Crudely put, even when one is not at work in the factory, one is still contributing to the sustenance of big business by consuming mass-produced artforms such as cinema or popular music. Thus, resulting from the culture industry as a whole is an effect that Adorno and Horkheimer call ‘anti-enlightenment’. ‘Anti-enlightenment’ occurs when rationality and the technical domination of nature cease to bring equality and freedom to the world, but instead become a form of “mass deception and [are] turned into a means for fettering consciousness.”<sup>20</sup>

Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended. The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification.<sup>21</sup>

Art is selected, labelled, and marketed in a capitalist system. It becomes predictable: in popular music one can guess the next note from the preceding notes and “feel flattered” when correct.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 121.

<sup>19</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. Jay M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 123.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.



There is no necessary place for the individual or for critical reflection. New art is produced, but it is only in quantity, not in quality. It is a filling in of a standardized form.

In light of his critique of jazz and popular music it is useful to elaborate somewhat on the concept of standardization in the culture industry. One of the main problems Adorno has with the culture industry is the way in which culture is mass-produced. This relates closely to artworks that are made following protocol, to ensure that the result is calculated for consumption by the masses. This is what Adorno calls combining the new with “the old and familiar” to make it into something of a new quality.<sup>23</sup> The culture industry has a way of absorbing new trends, spontaneity and talent in the artworld, reproducing it by protocol, and making it part of existing capital.<sup>24</sup> This dynamic functions through standardization; new, spontaneous art is standardized by the culture industry and made part of a system of entertainment of the masses.

Robert Witkin develops an accessible understanding of what Adorno means by standardization in *Adorno on popular culture*.<sup>25</sup> In this book, Witkin explains that standardization is the concept on which Adorno relies to distinguish authentic art, from popular art. According to Witkin, Adorno's concept of standardization means more than just following a certain production protocol and using repetition or ready-made elements.<sup>26</sup> By itself after all, these concepts have no use in distinguishing any art from other art, let alone serious art from popular art. Repetition and forms are omnipresent in art and definitely so in music: nearly all music is written in a harmonic and time-related structure of repeats, returning themes and developments thereof. *Standardized* forms are widespread in art; not only does popular music work with verses and choruses, but in classical music standard forms such as the fugue, minuet

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<sup>23</sup> Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," 85.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 112.

<sup>25</sup> Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

or sonata are abundant. Therefore it is important to understand precisely what Adorno understands to be a standardized form-type and an authentic form-type. According to Witkin, the form-type that is an instance of standardization is one in which “historicity is banished” as well as “any notion of a genuine subject who can realize or express a life-process.”<sup>27</sup> In standardized art the structure and organization of a work is based on standard forms in a static, fixed or repetitive way. New material may be used, but the protocols of production remain the same and have no sense of individual expression. By contrast, in serious works of art the structure of the artwork is a dynamic of standard forms delivered by the past, being actively developed by the artist and confronted with the contemporary life-world. Historicity and individuality play a far greater part in authentic art.

Once properly understood, this corruption by the culture industry can be seen in many different appearances. Only recently, in January 2020 a friend of mine released a single, that was a synthpop tune with critical lyrics about climate change. In the course of the first week after release they were scouted by editors of a TV programme for children. Three days after release they hit the newspapers and within a week the band had played on, or was book for, the most prominent national radio and TV shows for new music in the Netherlands. They have been played on the radio nearly every day since. It would be a mistake to think the song started out as a protest song against pollution and capitalism, because in fact it was part of the culture industry all along: the song was written and produced to be popular and ‘new’ under the masses, to make money and to persuade large radio companies to play it, exactly because of its contemporality and climate engagement. By listening to the song, I may feel better about myself, empowered to act against climate change, but in fact nothing changes and money is being made from it. Here it becomes clear that the content or so-called critical engagement of a song does not matter in Adorno’s analysis of the culture industry. What eventually triumphs

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<sup>27</sup> Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 100.

is the invested capital. Sex sells, 'exotic' jazz used to sell in the 1930s, and so-called new movements or genres such as climate protest do so now. What then, is Adorno's proposed solution to this? What *should* art do in order not to become part of the culture industry?

### **Aesthetic Theory and Authentic Art**

In line with their Marxist background, Adorno and Horkheimer regard culture and society (in terms of productive forces) as a historical totality.<sup>28</sup> The meaning of this is twofold: the drive for liberation in society is inseparable from the pursuit of it in culture. However, this also means that the domination or lack of freedom in society, which according to Adorno is seen in capitalism, but also in the remnants of WWII, is indicative of a failure in culture – e.g. art, music, and philosophy.<sup>29</sup> From the first part of this chapter, it has become clear that the content of a work of art does not refrain the culture industry from corrupting it. Therefore, a critical posture towards society in art must find its expression elsewhere. According to Adorno, we must focus on the *form* of an artwork. Indeed, it is only through form that art remains in a position to influence the complicated relationship it holds with the division of capital in society. In the second part of this chapter, my aim is to flesh out this relationality of form, musical material and the social. To do this, I focus on the concepts of authenticity, structural consistency and critical reflection and rely on Max Paddison and Lambert Zuidervaart for an interpretation of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.

As mentioned above, art in a Marxist sense, stands in complicated relation to society. Art that aims to criticize this relation is what Adorno calls 'authentic' art.<sup>30</sup> According to Paddison, 'authentic' art is both part of the critical movement striving for liberation of

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<sup>28</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiv.

<sup>29</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 152.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno originally uses a variety of words, that are often translated as 'authentic'. Most commonly, Adorno refers to authenticity with the German *Echtheit* or *Eigentlichkeit* which carry the connotation of realness, pureness, matter-of-factness and of being self-explanatory.

authority, ideology, and the capitalist market, as well as an expression of *that same* current ideology, a product of the current division of capital and labour in society.<sup>31</sup> The form of authentic art is thus polarized: on the one hand, form is freely determined and autonomous, thus self-supporting. The form of the artwork is based on, and responds to the “immanent demands” of the historically passed down material.<sup>32</sup> I discuss this below. For now, it is important to understand that art that responds to these demands, is what Adorno refers to as structurally or ‘immanently consistent’ [*immanente Stimmigkeit*], resulting in an “undisguised appropriateness to the historical situation.”<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, as Paddison argues, form is not free *because of* the fact that it responds to ‘immanent demands’ of the material and thus is predefined. Additionally, art itself is always a product of labour and therefore it is a reflection of the division of labour in society. According to Paddison, Adorno’s concept of authenticity is thus related to the idea of failure, as the historical and social world, “impinge on the apparently autonomous world of the work of art, fracturing its integrity and making its consistency look suspect and ideological in the face of the horrors of the real world.”<sup>34</sup> The polarity within the form of an artwork, eventually causes every artwork to fail. I elaborate on this at the end of this chapter.

Lambert Zuidervaart expands on the admittedly unclear notion of ‘immanent demands’ of the material in his book *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion*.<sup>35</sup> Zuidervaart notes that the critical innovation Adorno makes with regard to art but in particular to music, is to define the musical material as something with social and cultural content and

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<sup>31</sup> Max Paddison, "Authenticity and Failure in Adorno's Aesthetics of Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 199.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>33</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley van Blomster (London: Sheed and Ward, 1973), 214. The translation of *Stimmigkeit* as ‘consistency’ perhaps requires some additional nuance. *Stimmig* is often translated as ‘correct’ and in a more figurative sense may mean ‘harmonious’ or ‘balanced’.

<sup>34</sup> Paddison, "Authenticity and Failure in Adorno's Aesthetics of Music," 199.

<sup>35</sup> Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, UK: MIT Press, 1991).

history, rather than merely something ahistorical, physical or abstractly musical.<sup>36</sup> Zuidervaart writes:

Adorno conceives musical material to be the historical characteristics of tones and tonal relations as generated by the activity of composing and modified by subsequent composers. [...] Adorno claims that tones and their relations have sociohistorical tendencies, and these make unavoidable demands when compositional decisions are being made.<sup>37</sup>

On the one hand, Adorno claims that there are historical laws that determine the possibilities of what a composer can do with the available musical material. On the other hand, this presupposes a certain amount of individuality and independence at the composer's end to fill in these possibilities. For Adorno, whether an artwork is 'authentic' or 'resigned' depends on whether these choices are made by a composer independently of the dominant ideology, correctly corresponding to the 'immanent demands', and harmoniously and consistently within the composition itself. The composition then reflects the 'immanent demands' of the artistic material. If this is the case, an artwork realizes its critical potential.

These concepts often beg fellow-up questions. Setting out Adorno's theoretical framework is all the more difficult because Adorno gives no structured account of them and his writings are often deliberately paradoxical, polemical and therefore misconstruable. For now, I would like to refer you to the work of Paddison and Zuidervaart for additional explanations. Adorno himself explains 'authentic' art in contradistinction to 'resigned' art, which can best be understood as art that is taken over by the culture industry:

The dividing line between authentic art that takes on itself the crisis of meaning and a resigned art consisting literally and figuratively of

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<sup>36</sup> Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 95.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

protocol sentences is that in significant works the negation of meaning itself takes shape as a negative, whereas in others the negation of meaning is stubbornly and positively replicated. Everything depends on this: whether meaning inheres in the negation of meaning in the artwork or if the negation conforms to the status quo; whether the crisis of meaning is reflected in the works or whether it remains immediate and therefore alien to the subject.<sup>38</sup>

For Adorno, the concept at the basis of the distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘resigned’ art, is the ‘crisis of meaning’. This crisis consists in the fact that Adorno wishes for art to be a critique of dominant ideology in society, but that it must do so without itself becoming a utopian ideology. Similarly, Adorno wishes to critique rationality, but cannot do so by formulating a rational theory. Artists and philosophers must find ways to make meaningful statements about and against the horrors of capitalism, Auschwitz, and rationality, but they cannot rely on a utopian alternative world in which all is better, for then art would lose its connection to struggles in society. Nor can art deny the existence of something better than the *status quo*, for then there would be no incentive for change or critique. Authentic art rejects to being absorbed by the culture industry, as it rejects to straightforwardly being given meaning. Subsequently, this ambiguous meaninglessness is itself elevated to become the meaning of the artwork, which becomes meaningful in a negative sense: the meaning of the artwork is a reflection of the crisis of meaning through the musical material. ‘Resigned’ art by contrast, accepts its aesthetic meaninglessness as an unproblematic given, thereby confirming the dominating ideology, becoming parasitic of the world of authentic art. These ‘resigned’ works of art thus have a static meaning and deliver a fake sense of stability and safety. ‘Resigned’ art immediately is part of the same ideology it takes its meaning from: “The autonomy of works of art, which of course

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<sup>38</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 154.

rarely ever predominated in an entirely pure form, [...] is tendentially eliminated by the culture industry, with or without the conscious will of those in control."<sup>39</sup> Thus, for Adorno autonomy of art – a prerequisite for critical expression – is reflected in form, by relating to the demands of the material, rather than in explicit content. However, as I will discuss below, an absolutely autonomous artwork is an illusion for Adorno according to Paddison.

It is clear now that Adorno argues that 'authenticity', 'immanent consistency', form and progressiveness of art are related.<sup>40</sup> An artist is handed down material which is historically laden and makes demands qua form of the artwork. An authentic work of art meets these demands and by doing so in a consistent way, becomes 'immanently consistent', which according to Adorno is the only way a work is able to prove itself progressive. Progressiveness in this sense means that the artwork is an expression of freedom and autonomy; authentic art refuses to take on a static meaning and become part of the ruling ideology. In this way authentic art becomes critical reflection, becomes utopian, but only in the negative sense of criticizing the status quo.<sup>41</sup> However, art is also a treatment of historically laden material and is in every way created through means of capital and labour: "Social forces of production, [...] return in artworks as mere forms [...] because artistic labor is social labor; moreover, they are always product of this labor."<sup>42</sup> In the form, material and structure of an artwork resides exactly what it aims to criticize. Artworks thus find themselves in the predicament of being simultaneously ideological and authentic: "[t]hey contain society but are blind to their social content."<sup>43</sup> This is what

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<sup>39</sup> Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," 86.

<sup>40</sup> Sadly, one of the essays published by Adorno on the relation of progressiveness and 'immanent consistency' is yet to be translated into English, cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Reaktion und Fortschritt," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. XVII (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), 107. Originally published in *Anbruch* 12, (1930): 18-21. Here Adorno writes: "*Bloß in seiner immanenten Stimmigkeit nämlich weist ein Werk als fortgeschritten sich aus. In jedem Werk zeigt das Material konkrete Forderungen an, und die Bewegung, mit der jede neue darin zutage kommt, ist die einzig verpflichtende Gestalt von Geschichte für den Autor. Stimmig aber ist ein Werk, das dieser Forderung vollständig genügt.*"

<sup>41</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 236. As discussed early on in this chapter, Adorno criticizes instrumental reason and rationality. Accordingly, art cannot be utopian in a positive sense, as that would imply rationality and the building of a positive theory of an ideal future.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Paddison, "Authenticity and Failure in Adorno's Aesthetics of Music," 216.

Adorno describes when he writes: “The consistency of art works is the aspect that enables them to share in the truth, but it also implicates them in falsehood.”<sup>44</sup>

We come thus to the end of this chapter with a seemingly sombre conclusion. According to Paddison, one can hardly escape the idea that art is doomed to fail, for it is self-refuting and hypocrite.<sup>45</sup> Even though art can still criticize society as it reflects autonomously on the division of labour in society, it is impossible for art to not be part of the dominant ideology. But failure need not be a bad thing, Adorno writes:

Art works of the highest rank are distinguished from the others not through their success – for in what have they succeeded? – but through the manner of their failure. For the problems within them, both the immanent, aesthetic problems and the social ones [...] are so posed that the attempt to solve them must fail, whereas the failure of lesser works is accidental, a matter of mere subjective incapacity. A work of art is great when it registers a failed attempt to reconcile objective antimonies. That is its truth and its ‘success’: to have come up against its own limit. In these terms, any work of art which succeeds through not reaching this limit is a failure.<sup>46</sup>

For Adorno, every artwork is a failure. Interestingly, Adorno does make a distinction between ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ failures. A ‘successful’ failure is failed because it has come up to its own limit: it uses handed down artistic material and structures it in a way that lets the internal unsolvable social problem speak again, but through translating it into a problem concerning the work’s aesthetics and the limits of the artistic practice. This, I feel, is an

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<sup>44</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 242.

<sup>45</sup> Paddison, "Authenticity and Failure in Adorno's Aesthetics of Music," 216.

<sup>46</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music, Fragments and Texts*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 99–100.



inspiring conclusion artistically: Adorno on the one hand succeeds in putting into words the complex dynamic of art and capitalism, which is still relevant for current philosophy of art. On the other hand, he presents the artworld with a call for action; namely to fail, but to do it successfully by progressively structuring new art to the demands of historical material, expressing unsolvable problems through aesthetics and thus reaching for the limits of the artwork in question. Although it seems that Adorno has developed his understanding of historical and social meaning of music only on the tendencies of a tradition of Western-European composed music, I argue in chapter three, that improvised music is equally able to autonomously relate to demands made by the material.



# 2

## The Jazz Debate

Adorno has written a lot about jazz over the course of his life. His first ever essay on the genre was “Farewell to Jazz” [*Abschied vom Jazz*] which was written in reaction to the Nazi ban on jazz in 1933.<sup>47</sup> The first substantial piece of writing in which Adorno sets out the fundamental arguments of his view was “On Jazz” [*Über Jazz*], originally published in German in 1936 in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* under pseudonym.<sup>48</sup> Here Adorno touches on different subgenres of jazz, its social function and history and he gives an extensive analysis of jazz technique. In this chapter, I discuss in what way Adorno’s critique of jazz can be understood as coming forth from his aesthetic theory and his critique of the culture industry. I do this by discussing “On Jazz” and by elaborating somewhat on the historical context in which Adorno has developed his views. It appears there are no radical changes in the general arguments in Adorno’s jazz writings during his lifetime.<sup>49</sup> For, in 1953 Adorno summarised twenty years of developing critical thought on jazz in “*Zeitlose Mode: Zum Jazz*,” an article in which he – hence the title – barely alters the views he held on jazz in the 1930s, arguing that most of his observations can be applied timelessly to the music in the 50s.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, Adorno writes

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<sup>47</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Abschied vom Jazz,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. XVIII, 1984, 711-16. Originally in *Europäische Revue* 9, (1933): 313-316.

<sup>48</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “On Jazz,” trans. Jamie O. Daniel, *Discourse* 12, no. 1 (1989): 45-69. Originally published as Rottweiler, Hektor (pseud.), “Über Jazz,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5, (1937): 235-259.

<sup>49</sup> After publication of “On Jazz,” Adorno continued to write an addendum to this article, which was not published until 1982, as well as different reviews of American books on jazz published in the last two years of the 1930s, and an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Arts* by Runes and Schrikel published 1942, in which he for the first time mentions early black-American musicians of the New Orleans tradition. For more extensive analysis of these texts, see J. Bradford Robinson, “The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno: Some Thoughts on Jazz Reception in Weimar Germany,” *Popular Music* 13, no. 1 (1994): 1–25.

<sup>50</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “*Zeitlose Mode: Zum Jazz*,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. X (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 123-137. Originally published in *Merkur* 6, (1953): 537-48. Note that in 1950 among others, Miles Davis, Gill Evans, Dave Brubeck, Paul Desmond and Lennie Tristano had appeared in the American jazz scene introducing more intellectual kinds of cool jazz and third stream, and Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane had emerged to turn around the jazz genre yet again by playing modal jazz and hardbop. In spite of these severe changes to the style of playing and underlying philosophies of music and musical traditions, and the fact that Adorno must have been exposed to them during his lifetime, he does not differentiate between any of them.

in the preface to the 1963 publication of *Moments musicaux* that some of his works on jazz may be a little out of date, written in a lack of knowledge of specifically American aspects of jazz, and that he has made up for it in the jazz works of *Prisms* and in the *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*.<sup>51</sup> In the *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, however, Adorno shifts focus from ‘legitimate’ jazz music to ‘popular music’ (*leichte Musik*), a move that appears to be more of a repositioning of focus than a compensation of the omissions in earlier work, as J. Bradford Robinson argues.<sup>52</sup>

In the first part of this chapter, I set out Adorno’s views on jazz, focussing on his article “On Jazz.” Next, I present two readings of Adorno’s critique of jazz. For the first reading, I rely on an article written by Robinson, who develops a sense of the historical context in which Adorno wrote his early texts on jazz.<sup>53</sup> For Robinson, the changes and sociocultural roots of the jazz tradition are so significant they cannot be left unappreciated by such a form of philosophical, social or aesthetic evaluation.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Adorno mentions the sociohistorical background of the music only in passing and rather late in his career. Robinson argues this is due to a historical bias caused through limited access to jazz music for philosophers such as Adorno in a Weimar Germany context. Lee B. Brown and Gary Zabel also represent this side in the debate concerning the analysis of Adorno’s writing and his historical context. They argue that Adorno’s neglect for the Afro-American roots of the genre can be countered by making a distinction between “commercial” and “genuine” jazz.<sup>55</sup> I argue however, that by making this distinction on the basis of sociocultural essentialism (cf. Afro-American roots of jazz music), the distinction proposed by Brown and Zabel is illegitimate and renders Adorno’s potentially

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<sup>51</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Vorrede," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. XVII (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 3. Originally published in *Moments Musicaux*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1964.

<sup>52</sup> Robinson, "The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno," 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Lee B. Brown, "Adorno’s Critique of Popular Culture: The Case of Jazz Music," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 26, no. 1 (1992): 22; Gary Zabel, "Adorno on Music: A Reconsideration," *The Musical Times* 130, no. 1754 (1989): 200.

very useful concepts and criteria, entirely useless. Moreover, jazz music has been developed in all other parts of the world after its birth in the Afro-American culture.

On the other side of the debate stand scholars such as Evelyn Wilcock and James Buhler, who argue that there is a philosophical foundation to Adorno's neglect of the Afro-American history of the jazz genre.<sup>56</sup> In the second part of this chapter, I weigh Zabel's line of argumentation that Adorno's views are elitist and ethnocentric, against the views of James Buhler in his article "Frankfurt School Blues: Rethinking Adorno's Critique of Jazz."<sup>57</sup> In this article Buhler defends Adorno from his critics in a convincing way. However, it would be precipitated to conclude that Buhler has entirely rethought Adorno's Critique of jazz, as his focus is on early jazz music and he therefore does not explicitly consider contemporary jazz music, or any jazz after the 1950s. I pick up this line of thought in chapter three. In any case, Adorno's writings have sparked an interesting debate. Eric Hobsbawm, one of the most prominent historians of the previous century, side-notes by example that Adorno's texts are among "the most stupid pages ever written about jazz."<sup>58</sup> If Adorno is to be of any significance to the current jazz scene, he must be defended from these accusations first.

### **"On Jazz": Debating Adorno's Ethnocentrism**

The main trouble Adorno has with jazz music is the fact that it is (incorrectly) believed to represent liberation, both in social and in musical terms.<sup>59</sup> According to Adorno, the jazz scene is a liberation of the strict and formal everyday life of the labourer in Marxist terms. It is presented as erotic, sensual, free and amusing. Musically, jazz represents liberation in a

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<sup>56</sup> James Buhler, "Frankfurt School Blues: Rethinking Adorno's Critique of Jazz," in *Apparitions: Essays on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music*, by Berthold Hoeckner (London: Routledge, 2005), 104; Evelyn Wilcock, "Adorno, Jazz and Racism: "Über Jazz" and the 1934-7 British Jazz Debate," *Telos*, no. 107 (1996): 72.

<sup>57</sup> Buhler, "Frankfurt School Blues: Rethinking Adorno's Critique of Jazz."

<sup>58</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2014), 348.

<sup>59</sup> Jamie O. Daniel, "Introduction to Adorno's "On Jazz"," *Discourse* 12, no. 1 (1989): 40.

different way. Jazz playing is based on different kinds of improvisation, but in most of them – and certainly in the subgenres Adorno criticizes – there is a soloist who freely and spontaneously plays an instantly made-up melody over the basic harmonic structure of a song. A lot of these songs, but not all, were variations or reharmonizations of famous musical songs. Adorno regards these improvised melodies – or what he calls “departures from the norm” – as “calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to validate the validity of the system.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Adorno attempts to convince us of the ideological character of jazz music. Jazz *seems* to represent liberation both musically and socially, but it only does so by departing from, and returning to a validated system, thereby conforming to this system. This can be understood musically in terms of the improvisation creating a contrast or harmonic tension with the basic song structure, but nevertheless always returning to it, but it can also be understood socially: jazz music is presented as autonomous entertainment. As Jamie Daniel describes it, jazz “presents itself to the consumer as the unstructured framework within which he is allowed to transgress, within which he can libidinize his leisure time.”<sup>61</sup> According to Adorno, in fact the aim is to distract and entertain the labourer from his everyday work in a way that does not seem to be connected to capitalism, but most certainly is.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, this invitation to transgress and libidinize is based on the fact that jazz music is promoted by the culture industry in connection to black American music, meant to be exotic, new and sensual. Adorno mentions this connection between the corruption of jazz music by the culture industry and the commercial powers of the black American exotic image throughout his works on jazz music, but it is often unclear that his critique is about the capitalist dynamics and the way jazz music is *labelled* to mask its ideological function, rather than the exotic image of the black American musician.<sup>63</sup> In any case, Adorno rarely credits the great skill involved in

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<sup>60</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 129.

<sup>61</sup> Daniel, "Introduction to Adorno's 'On Jazz'," 41.

<sup>62</sup> Adorno, "On Jazz," 51.

<sup>63</sup> Buhler, "Frankfurt School Blues," 119–20.

the performance of the music and of some of the famous jazz players in particular. Jazz, according to Adorno, is completely corrupted by the culture industry. This explains why in the beginning of “On Jazz” he refers to jazz as a typical German music “that has existed since the [first world] war.”<sup>64</sup> In “On Jazz,” Adorno contests that the African origin or so-called primitiveness of jazz are in fact minimal and that jazz rather is a product of European capitalism and colonial suppression:

The extent to which jazz has anything at all to do with genuine black music is highly questionable; the fact that it is frequently performed by blacks and that the public clamors for “black jazz” as a sort of brand-name doesn’t say much about it.<sup>65</sup>

Adorno then continues by mentioning that the hiring of black musicians by European-American entertainment businesses is “merely a confusing parody of colonial imperialism,”<sup>66</sup> and concludes with:

The archaic stance of jazz is as modern as the “primitives” who fabricate it. [...] There is nothing archaic in jazz but that which is engendered out of modernity through the mechanism of suppression.<sup>67</sup>

Hence, according to Adorno, the sense of archaism and primitiveness in black American jazz music is not something that originates from the African roots of jazz. Rather, it originates from capitalism and is created by the culture industry to endow jazz music with a sense of freedom and invigoration to occlude the real, ideological function of the music. Indeed, Adorno sometimes writes cynically about jazz music, calling it “banal,” “indifferent,” “ornamental,” “cliché,” and “amateuristic.” Later on in “On Jazz” he tries to make often heavily criticized

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<sup>64</sup> Adorno, “On Jazz,” 45.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 53–54.

connections between jazz and fascism or sexual consummation.<sup>68</sup> However, underneath all of this we find a critique that makes complete sense with Adorno's critique of instrumental rationality, capitalism and the culture industry.

### **Weimar Germany**

The main concern scholars with a more historical or sociological approach to Adorno's criticism have, is the near impossibility for Adorno to be adequately invested in the music at the time of writing. In the period after WWI Germany suffered from a cultural and economical isolation by the Allied blockade. At the time, black American jazz musicians were already playing elsewhere in Europe, but in Germany not even Anglo-American gramophone records were available.<sup>69</sup> This cultural isolation was prolonged in the Weimar republic by the hyperinflation of the German *Papiermark* during the French occupation of the Ruhr, resulting both in exceptionally high levels of xenophobia directed against citizens of the US and Western Europe, as well as a seriously unattractive economical climate for musicians or record labels from abroad. This means that from 1919 until 1924 there was virtually no American jazz in Germany, except for a surrogate, watered-down version based on German commercial traditions and "vague notions as to the actual sound and nature of the fabled music from America."<sup>70</sup> Although commentators at the time speak of a 'jazz craze', Germany had to rely on its own musicians to provide for the needs of the public. Hence, what occurred was something of a process of assimilation and reproduction; trying to guess what jazz must have sounded like and reproducing it with existing ensembles and compositions. Often rarities were

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<sup>68</sup> Especially connecting jazz to fascism renders nonsense with the Nazi ban on jazz in mind, starting as early as 1932 with public performances and leading to a full legal ban of all black American jazz music in 1935, months before the publication of "Über Jazz." See Robinson, "The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno," 3, 21. "[W]hy have its fascist tendencies not revealed themselves in the land of its origin, in the USA? Even allowing for the Nazi 'Swing craze' of the late 1930s and the manipulative entertainment cartels of America today, these objections cannot be taken lightly. Adorno was perhaps too eager to draw universal conclusions from the particulars of his musical environment."

<sup>69</sup> Robinson, "The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno," 4.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



simply added on top of the traditional German music and simply labelled and marketed under the name of jazz, which leads Robinson to conclude that the “first half-decade of Germany’s Jazz Age, then, was nourished on music which bore only a tenuous relation to American popular music, and no relation at all to the legitimate American jazz of King Oliver, Sydney Bechet, Louis Armstrong or James P. Johnson.”<sup>71</sup> Later on in the interbellum, around 1926-1927, American jazz did enter Germany in exchange for German recordings of classical music. This, however, was still not black jazz music, as can be seen in catalogues of leading German importers at the time.<sup>72</sup> Thus, the original American jazz music was commercially unavailable at any time during the Weimar Republic. After his move to Oxford, Adorno may have become more acquainted with jazz music, but as Evelyn Wilcock skilfully reconstructs, the discourse in the 1930s in England was heavily racialized and the musicians’ union was especially hostile towards Afro-American musicians.<sup>73</sup>

It is easy to see why Adorno would express himself so negatively about the type of commercial German jazz music, since it is more about being a commercial success than about artistic expression. In Adorno’s terms, jazz then does not refer to what we today call jazz music, nor did it refer to American music; it referred to commercial German dance music.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, it becomes clear why it is very much possible that Adorno suffered from a bias in the time he started to write about jazz. If the latter is the case, scholars such as Robinson argue that it is problematic that Adorno never altered his position during the rest of his life in Oxford, the US

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<sup>71</sup> Robinson, "The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno," 5–6.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Wilcock, "Adorno, Jazz and Racism." It would be too much of an digression to fully discuss the discourse in England, but to give an impression Buhler (p.105) and Wilcock (p.71) both quote the leading British music magazine *Melody Maker*: “The reason most people understand nothing of negro [*sic*] music is because they do not know that the resemblance between the black and white races is only superficial. A negro is not just a white man with a colored exterior. His mind is different. He thinks differently along altogether different lines.”

<sup>74</sup> Robinson, "The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno," 1.

and post-war Germany.<sup>75</sup> One might argue that Adorno ignores the Afro-American sociocultural history of jazz and that his views are thus ethnocentric.

Scholars such as Gary Zabel and Lee B. Brown, argue on the basis of this line of argumentation that “commercial” jazz such as the 1930s German entertainment should be distinguished from “genuine” Afro-American jazz.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, regard Adorno’s critique of commercial music together with the purported bias he held during writing and it seems hasty for Adorno to conclude that *all* jazz is fully corrupted by the culture industry. As Zabel notes, the origin of jazz music is often pinpointed at Congo Square in New Orleans in reaction to colonial slave trade and Adorno makes not account of this fact when he argues that jazz has no significant social or critical potential:

[Adorno] neglects to locate jazz concretely in the historical context of African experience in the New World. It would be odd, to say the least, if a musical form that had its origins in blues, and could only develop by braving the hostility of the surrounding white culture, had no element of social criticism.<sup>77</sup>

This, to be fair, is a very good point. Although it may be argued that Adorno does not fully neglect the historical context of jazz music and rather emphasises the corruption by the culture industry, I find it impossible to deny the element of social criticism inherent in (early) jazz music. Adorno unfortunately omits this in his analysis. For now, however, I wish to focus on the illegitimate basis on which the distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘commercial’ as introduced by Zabel, is made. I find this distinction problematic for different reasons. In the next part of this chapter I wish to turn to these, but first I wish to introduce a different reading

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<sup>75</sup> Robinson, "The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno," 2.

<sup>76</sup> Zabel, "Adorno on Music," 200.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

of Adorno's text – the reading of James Buhler, in which he attempts to defend Adorno from accusations of ethnocentrism and elitism.

### **'Genuine' jazz**

Buhler himself writes of his endeavour as “rethinking” Adorno's critique of jazz in “Frankfurt School Blues: Rethinking Adorno's Critique of Jazz.”<sup>78</sup> He aims to do so by placing Adorno in a broader theoretical framework and arguing that there is a philosophical explanation to his views on jazz. As such, Buhler's reading of Adorno's jazz texts relies to a lesser extent on the historical context in which the texts have been written, but rather it relies on the whole of Adorno's oeuvre. In this reading the relation between jazz and the culture industry plays a central role. Moreover, it makes sense in relation to *Aesthetic Theory* and other later publications on music by Adorno. I prefer this reading above the one discussed earlier in this chapter, because taking a more philosophical or aesthetic approach to Adorno's texts delivers interesting concepts and criteria to evaluate current jazz music. It provides tools to make both positive and critical judgements of contemporary jazz music. Thus, Buhler's reading provides a more relevant, inspiring and useful Adorno in the context of contemporary aesthetic discussions.

Buhler writes that Adorno cannot be accused of ethnocentrism, in fact Buhler argues quite the contrary: that Adorno attempts to formulate a critique of racism in European and colonial society through his critique of jazz. As Buhler quotes Wilcock:

It is his fierce resistance to even a hint of racial essentialism, Wilcock argues, that accounts for Adorno's deep suspicion of the discourse on jazz and so also the music itself, which he felt was compromised to the

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<sup>78</sup> Buhler, "Frankfurt School Blues."

core by its mediation through a culture industry that exploited jazz not for its musical significance but for its ability to tap into the “popular taste for what was foreign or exotic.”<sup>79</sup>

That said, I do not – and nor does Buhler – want to make it appear as if Adorno has portrayed jazz in the most representative way thinkable. Adorno often generalizes a lot and takes no account of the interesting elements of the genre and the individual artistry and skill that are involved. Nevertheless, this reading of Adorno casts doubt on the legitimacy of the distinction introduced by Zabel. It makes no sense that ‘genuine’ jazz music contains elements of social criticism, and ‘commercial’ jazz does not, when the entire distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘commercial’ jazz is based on whether or not the music has roots in a strictly defined sociocultural context. Relying on cultural essentialism to make such a distinction implies the exactly what the ‘genuine’ jazz music aims to criticize: widespread racism in colonial America.

As described in chapter one, for Adorno culture and society are a historical totality. This means that art is part labour itself and can simultaneously be a critique of the division of labour, which is why even critical art eventually is doomed to fail. The truly important question is whether the artwork attempts to resist the commodification by the dominant ideology or whether it complies with it, and as Zabel continues to significantly observe:

[I]t was the development of the dance band in the 1930s and 40s that tamed jazz in the interest of social conformity. [...] It was transformed from protest at suffering of an enslaved and exploited people into an instrument of the reproduction of the dominant social order.<sup>80</sup>

Jazz *is* transformed and thus becomes part of dominant ideology. This is exactly the kind of culture industry dynamic that Adorno warns for. Zabel himself recognizes how jazz music is

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<sup>79</sup> Wilcock, "Adorno, Jazz and Racism," 64. quoted in Buhler, "Frankfurt School Blues," 105.

<sup>80</sup> Zabel, "Adorno on Music," 200.

commodified by the culture industry, but then distinguishes this ‘commercial’ jazz music from ‘genuine’, socially engaged, black-American jazz music. Buhler argues against Zabel’s distinction. He notes that if Zabel acknowledges the commodification of jazz music as a given, by distinguishing ‘commercial’ jazz from ‘genuine’ jazz, we render Adorno’s critique useless. By making a hard distinction on the basis of sociocultural essentialism, one both renders Adorno’s ‘ethnocentric’ critique invalid to aesthetically evaluate ‘genuine’ jazz, and one renders ‘commercial’ jazz ineffective as a critique of society. According to Buhler, this means “Adorno is saved only to be made superfluous.”<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, drawing a sharp line between ‘commercial’ music and ‘genuine’ music makes no musical sense. To give an example: bebop is a style of virtuoso jazz improvisation which is often seen as a historical development in which black jazz players diverged from the traditional jazz playing of the 1930s because it had become appropriated by white orchestra’s, as Lee B. Brown does for example.<sup>82</sup> This may be read as a sociocultural move, but the rise of bebop is accompanied by a decline of big band music and in this manner also turned out to be a way of securing a fair share of the concurrently established jazz audience for black jazz players. Attributing this move only to the black jazz players wanting to ‘one-up’ the others and thus keeping jazz music ‘genuine’ as Brown does, assumes the same problematic distinction as made by Zabel. There are no strict sociocultural borders in jazz, as it is an increasingly global and diverse artform. Often times jazz scholars rely too strongly on the African-American background of the jazz genre, while for contemporary discussions this makes little sense; a neglect of the European history of jazz music is particularly problematic in the case of polymeric or free jazz and improvised music, of which the major developments have taken place in post-war Europe rather than the United States.<sup>83</sup> If one has the ambition to rebut

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<sup>81</sup> Buhler, "Frankfurt School Blues," 103.

<sup>82</sup> Brown, "Adorno's Critique of Popular Culture," 22.

<sup>83</sup> See Floris J. Schuiling, "Compositions in Improvisation: The Instant Composers Pool Orchestra," *ACT: Zeitschrift Für Musik & Performance* 5, (2014): 7.

Adorno's critique of jazz by formulating criteria for a distinction between 'genuine' and 'commercial' jazz, this should be done in terms of musical aesthetics, not in terms of race or skin colour.

Thus, Buhler succeeds in rethinking Adorno's critique of jazz by relating it to its theoretical context and there is a reply to Adorno's critics – that they “take the sting out of Adorno's critique.”<sup>84</sup> However, to completely rethink Adorno's critique of jazz we are in need of an analysis of contemporary jazz and a determination of whether it has shown to be resistant enough to the dynamics of capitalism and – in contrast to what Adorno writes about 1930 jazz music – is made with an autonomous law of form in mind. Arguably, there is a gap in the writings of critics of Adorno. Their critique renders Adorno's critique of jazz entirely redundant by distinguishing the 'genuine' from the 'commercial' on the basis of racial essentialism. This is something Buhler successfully rejects, but he does so only by understanding jazz music in terms of music that is about a century old. Like Adorno himself, Buhler does not mention any jazz created after Miles Davis. A serious revival attempt would need to include the music and creative dynamics of the genre as it is right now. We thus have to deal with the following issue in the next chapter: saving contemporary jazz music from Adorno's critique, which means taking up the critique in terms of useful concepts and criteria and subsequently arguing that at least some jazz music, somehow is able to deflect some of this criticism in terms of musical aesthetic. By doing this, Adorno's critique is also saved from mouldering away and becoming a thing of the past. It is proven relevant for the jazz genre in its current form. In the next chapter, I argue that Adorno's critique can be taken seriously to evaluate current jazz music, but that strong arguments can be made for the fact that contemporary jazz music is a successful artistic enterprise according to Adorno's views.

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<sup>84</sup> Buhler, "Frankfurt School Blues," 103.

Bebop has been followed up swiftly by the development of different subgenres, such as cool jazz and hardbop. All of these have also become, in a sense, outdated. A lot of jazz players in the Netherlands find the Royal Conservatory in The Hague old-fashioned because they only educate traditional jazz and bebop to people from over the whole world. To think that bebop today has the same sociocritical value as in the 1940s makes no sense. My point is, commercial and critical value of music change over time – something with which Adorno would agree. For Adorno, performing Bach in the historically most traditional way is an impairment of the critical potential of the music.<sup>85</sup> Music is required to reinvent itself to retain its critical potential. This need not be a bad thing, it may even help explain the rapid aesthetic development of the jazz genre over the past century, but it means that jazz music must reinvent its relation to historically passed-down material continuously. Reinterpretations of philosophical theories in the same way require to be evaluated and adjusted over time. These are the central topics in chapter three.

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<sup>85</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno, "Bach Gegen Seine Liebhaber Verteidigt," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. X (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 124-38. Originally published in *Merkur* 5, no. 6 (1951): 535-46.





# 3

## Rethinking the Jazz Critique

In chapter one of this thesis, I have developed an understanding of the criteria Adorno employs for judging and analysing works of art. Specifically, I have shown that for Adorno, ‘authentic’ art is defined by its balanced form, by the fact that its form corresponds appropriately to the demands made by the historically passed down material. Through its form, rather than through its content, an artwork is able to become progressive, to resist any pregiven meaning or conceptualization, and – in terms of the social – to be an expression of freedom and autonomy. The meaning of ‘authentic’ art is defined by its critical relation to the historically passed down material; its refusal of pregiven meaning becomes the meaning of the artwork. In opposition to ‘authentic’ art stands ‘resigned’ art. ‘Resigned’ art is produced by following rules, or protocol, and in this sense is not progressive or new; ‘resigned’ art is a *replication* of historical material and of the dominant ideology. ‘Resigned’ art does not relate to these in a critical way. ‘Resigned’ art then has no meaning, other than its own meaninglessness.

In this final chapter of my thesis, I employ these criteria as starting point to evaluate contemporary jazz music, but I apply these criteria in a different way than Adorno applies them to early jazz music. Instead of condemning jazz music to the realms of ‘resigned’ art and the culture industry, I argue that contemporary jazz is a type of ‘authentic’ art. More specifically, I argue that the criteria for ‘authentic’ art as developed in chapter one are more applicable to the creative dynamics of current jazz music and the way in which it behaves socially, than the criteria for ‘resigned’ art. This places my argument in a complicated relation to Adorno. On

the one hand, I rely on Adorno's concepts and criteria as described in chapter one. In the previous chapter I have defended these criteria from Adorno's critics with regard to early jazz. In line with Buhler's reading of Adorno, I have argued that Adorno's critique of jazz should not be rejected on the basis of elitism or ethnocentrism. On the other hand, I argue against Adorno that not all jazz music is 'resigned' art – something Adorno, as we have seen in the previous chapter, has argued throughout his writings.

Both of these lines of argumentation hinge on a proper understanding of the appropriate aesthetic evaluation of contemporary jazz music. I have argued against Brown and Zabel that there should not be made a distinction between 'authentic' and 'commercial' jazz on the basis of ethnicity or roots. Instead, as I argue in this chapter, the proper reply to Adorno's critique is to formulate such a distinction in aesthetic terms. In the first part of this chapter I suggest that the manner in which contemporary jazz music is appropriately evaluated, is to focus on in what way the artist relates to the musical material and expresses herself through it. It is here that Adorno is proved useful and legitimate once again. For if jazz is appropriately evaluated by investigating the relation of the artist and her material, the aesthetic evaluation of contemporary jazz music may turn out to be more in line with Adorno's understanding of what makes art 'authentic' and worthwhile than he himself would have thought. In this sense, this chapter picks up where Buhler's defence of Adorno ends: now that Adorno's critique of jazz has been adequately rethought in terms of jazz music that is 100 years old, my current aim is to bring Adorno's theory and concepts to the present jazz scene, while at the same time maintaining a critical stance towards them.

This chapter consists of three parts. In the first part, I discuss a different approach to the jazz form than we have seen until so far. The approach that I shall draw on is one dating from the 60s that regards jazz performance as 'instant composition'. In this conception of improvised music, the relation between performance, performer and musical material becomes

apparent. This relationality of performance and musical material forms the basis for the rest of the chapter, as it is exactly this relation that is aesthetically interesting. The ‘instant composition’ conception, apart from presenting a new way to analyse jazz music, opens new ways in which Adorno’s theory is relevant to aesthetic discourse regarding current jazz music. In the second part of this chapter, I formulate a reply to Adorno’s critique of standardization in jazz music, by introducing the concept of effortless mastery. In the third part, I briefly return to Buhler and conclude the chapter by formulating the distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘commercial’ jazz in aesthetic terms and arguing that contemporary jazz music can be understood to be an ‘authentic’ art form.

### **Instant Composition**

In this part of the chapter, I explain what I understand jazz music to be and why, when conceptualized as ‘instant composition’, it requires a different evaluation within the critical framework of Adorno. Jazz is a very broad genre of music, consisting of a large amount of diverse subgenres. Throughout all jazz music, there may be different elements that often return, but improvisation is the principal element in jazz that differentiates it from other music. Naturally, just like there are many subgenres of jazz music, there are different kinds of improvisation used in jazz music.<sup>86</sup> Some kinds are more free than others, some have a particular vocabulary, licks, or scales, and some styles of improvisation like to play with these different styles, mixing them together, now ‘quoting’ a bebop lick and then continuing with something more related to, perhaps, free jazz. The latter is the kind of playing that Avishai Cohen and Yonathan Avishai engage in together.

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<sup>86</sup> I would like to provide in some listening material to illustrate these different kinds of improvisation, but this list of artists is by no means exhaustive, nor does any artist play confine to one style. It is just to illustrate very briefly the concepts mentioned with a very small selection of the music I am familiar with. For free jazz: Instant Composers Pool, Michiel Braam. For bebop: Charlie Parker, Bud Powell. For hardbop: John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley. For cool jazz: (late) Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck. For modern: Shai Maestro, Avishai Cohen, Brad Mehldau, Ibrahim Maalouf, Quitnet.

### Case Study: Avishai Cohen at the Bimhuis

For some time now, I have been something of an admirer of the trumpeter Avishai Cohen. Avishai Cohen is a renowned jazz improviser originally from Tel Aviv, who studied jazz trumpet at the Berklee College of Music. He is now based in New York and composes mostly instrumental music with a lot of improvisation. The music is often about subjects that move him, such as children growing up in war, family or religion.<sup>87</sup> I visited a concert of him playing with his quintet at The Concertgebouw on the 16th of April 2018, and more recently I visited a duo concert with pianist Yonathan Avishai at the Bimhuis, 14th of December 2019. Before the concert the two musicians also gave an interview. In this duo formation Avishai Cohen and Yonathan Avishai have recorded an album, *Playing The Room*, which of course is not the same as a performance, but some of the performed songs are also included on the album.<sup>88</sup> In fact, the performance rather than the recording will be my case study for reasons listed below. Avishai Cohen and Yonathan Avishai have known each other from childhood and are able to start a concert without having discussed what they will play.<sup>89</sup> In their playing, interaction is central. Their improvisation is a way of collective storytelling, in which they rely on their pool of common musical knowledge and shared musical development and upbringing. During any given performance, the musicians combine different traditions, such as bebop, Israeli, Indian, and West-African music. On their album and during the show, for example, they played a rendition of a traditional Israeli lullaby as well as a performance based on the Stevie Wonder tune *Sir Duke*. In the rest of this chapter I will refer to this concert and explain why, in my opinion, the music of Avishai Cohen and Yonathan Avishai is an example of ‘authentic’ art in Adorno’s terms.

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<sup>87</sup> Avishai Cohen and Yonathan Avishai, Interview before their show at the Bimhuis, 14 December 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Avishai Cohen and Yonathan Avishai, *Playing The Room (Album)* (Berlin: ECM Records, 2019).

<sup>89</sup> Cohen and Avishai, Interview before their show at the Bimhuis.

Starting in the 1960s jazz musicians and musicologists have regarded improvisation as a type of “instant composing,” which is understood to indicate “a distinctive understanding of improvisation, which is not opposed to composition, but rather includes it.”<sup>90</sup> This is relevant in connection to Adorno for two reasons. Firstly, it is relevant because Adorno regards composition and improvisation as two separate and hierarchical elements in early jazz music.<sup>91</sup> Adorno is convinced that improvisation is subordinate to composition and merely confirms to the predefined boundaries of the composition. Thus ‘instant composition’ may form a reply to Adorno’s critique of improvisation in jazz music. Secondly, understanding jazz music as a performance of instant composition, in which improvisation and composition are not opposed and both included, redefines the jazz form and causes the aesthetic evaluation to be altered accordingly.

It is important to understand that this relationality of composition and improvisation in the contemporary understanding of improvised music, is a complex and practice-related one that requires severe reorientation of aesthetical evaluation to include not composition in improvisation or vice-versa, but rather the dynamic of composition and improvisation together, as it occurs in music as *performance*. As Floris Schuiling writes, instant composition means that “there is always a degree of both improvisation and composition involved in a performance

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<sup>90</sup> Floris J. Schuiling, "Compositions in Improvisation: The Instant Composers Pool Orchestra," *ACT: Zeitschrift Für Musik & Performance* 5, (2014): 3. Schuiling focusses a lot on the Dutch ensemble called the Instant Composers Pool. ICP plays music (1967-present) developed to leave open room for different kinds of improvisation based on American free jazz tradition and the 1960s European tradition of independent improvised music, sometimes referred to as *Emanzipation* or *Kaputtspiel-Zeit*. They do not always identify themselves as strictly playing jazz music, especially in the 70s and 80s because of the connotation of African-American social protest which seemed inappropriate for an all-Dutch band. However, Schuiling cites interviews in which it appears their aesthetic ambition is the same of renowned jazz ensembles such as the Ornette Coleman Double Quartet. Members of the band are often experienced jazz players, improvisers and/or modern composers. Schuiling himself uses ICP as a case study to rethink jazz ethnography and argues that European developments in improvised music should be an integral part of jazz history in chapter two of Floris J. Schuiling, *The Instant Composers Pool and Improvisation beyond Jazz* (New York: Routledge, 2019). There he writes that “the orchestra is often praised for its ability to combine anarchic free improvisation with more traditional jazz drawing on the modernist bop of Herbie Nichols and Thelonious Monk as well as the big band repertoire of Duke Ellington and even older Dixieland-style jazz.” (p.2) Interestingly, ICP composers were part of a movement in the Netherlands that developed into a Marxist movement critiquing division of labour, but at a 1968 concert during which also political speeches were held, Mengelberg – the main composer and bandleader – “wanted nothing to do with the texts from Trotsky, Che Guevara, Mao and Adorno.” (p.11)

<sup>91</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Jazz," trans. Jamie O. Daniel, *Discourse* 12, no. 1 (1989): 47-8. Originally published as Rottweiler, Hektor (pseud.), "Über Jazz," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5, (1937): 235-59.

and that the relation between them mediates the interaction among musicians.”<sup>92</sup> Schuiling thus attributes an active yet mediated function to the predefined composition or score: it plays an interactive role in the musical process similar to that of human actors – it “suggests certain phrases, relations and ways of playing, and these suggestions are negotiated just as if one of the musicians had done them.”<sup>93</sup> In very free jazz the score is left out entirely and the suggestions are based on only the musicians, but the dynamic remains unchanged.

Conversely, Adorno only sees the significance of separating the evaluation of performance and composition in terms of classical music; for example arguing that the composer’s interpretation of her own work should not be taken to be the best or final interpretation.<sup>94</sup> In “Bach Defended against his Devotees,” Adorno voices his critique of the historicist movement surrounding the performance of early music – specifically Bach – who play the music on original instruments, convinced that this is the only correct rendition.<sup>95</sup> In his texts on early jazz Adorno does not regard the composition and improvisation as equal parts of the jazz performance. According to Adorno, the jazz form is dominated by its function as commodity, ultimately defined by protocol and standardization, in contrast to art that is composed following an autonomous law.<sup>96</sup> Adorno thus evaluates early jazz music in a framework based on composition and to what extent it is composed following an autonomous law. In this framework, it makes sense that the “seemingly improvisational moments” are added to mask this “standardized commodity character.”<sup>97</sup>

However in jazz music, a composition cannot be seen to represent the musical structure or form by itself – and improvisation cannot be seen as merely masking it – as Adorno takes it.

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<sup>92</sup> Schuiling, "Compositions in Improvisation," 8.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>94</sup> Max Paddison, "Authenticity and Failure in Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 202.

<sup>95</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), 142–43.

<sup>96</sup> Adorno, "On Jazz," 47.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

Rather, a composition should be seen as a “creative tool” used by musicians in their creative process.<sup>98</sup> It is even possible to leave out the composition altogether. Adorno thus fails to see the true openness and creative dynamic of the artform in improvised music. In jazz performance a composition contributes to the creative possibilities and heterogeneity of the musical process, rather than imposing a predefined, standardized, and uniform structure onto the music. This means that in jazz, the musical form most certainly not gained in composition, but elsewhere. I suggest that in jazz music form is created in the collective, creative process itself. As Schuiling writes: “Form organises collective action, and collective action organises form.”<sup>99</sup> This means that it is definitely possible – but in no way necessary – to work with certain pregiven, possibly even written ideas in jazz music, but that these pregiven ideas are at a level playing field with spontaneous, improvised ideas. The musical interaction of both types of ideas defines the form of jazz music.

Employing this contemporary understanding of the jazz form as ‘instant composition’, evaluating the performance and its internal relationalities rather than the composition of music, is crucial for the remainder of this chapter, because it brings into focus what is up for aesthetic evaluation in jazz music: not the composition, not the improvisation, but the relationalities and processes within the jazz performance. Avishai Cohen, for example, relates to musical material from different traditions of improvised music. How exactly this occurs will differ in every performance, depending on what he would like to tell with his music, on the musicians he plays with, and on the context in which the performance takes place. Early jazz music delivers autonomous renditions of famous musical songs on instruments available to anyone in the streets of New Orleans. Every musician would have their own individual interpretation of the music and those would change over time. If Avishai Cohen would perform such an ‘old’ song,

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<sup>98</sup> Schuiling, "Compositions in Improvisation," 16.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

relevant aesthetic considerations would be how the song relates to the rest of a concert, whether it gains any meaning from its context – is it an homage to an inspiring musician? – what changes are made spontaneously in reaction to suggestions of musicians present or the concert setting. In other words: How does the performance relate autonomously to the musical material?

### **Effortless Mastery**

Understanding jazz as ‘instant composition’ does not mean that a jazz performance inevitably is either standardized or autonomous. Merely playing an ‘old’ song without any critical reflection, artistic expression, or autonomous relation with regards to the musical material would indeed be standardized and based on protocol. From the preceding discussion about the jazz form as instant composition, it may not be clear why, given the fact that all ideas may contribute equally to a jazz performance, it appears there are certain aesthetic elements that occur more than others in the jazz genre. Jazz seems to have a particular vocabulary. For Adorno this is an important indication of the standardization in jazz music – the relation of production and reproduction in jazz music. As he puts it into words: “a successful jazz hit must unite an individual, characteristic element with utter banality on the other level.”<sup>100</sup> This “utter banality” is later on in the article specified as “average consciousness,” something that is mediocre and obsolete.<sup>101</sup> I recognize that in jazz music musical material is reused a lot and that this is potentially problematic for Adorno. But then again, reusing musical material to some extent is inevitable in all music. In the following part of this chapter, I argue that the reuse of musical material in jazz need not be necessarily problematic, but that it inherently belongs to the jazz practice in which also authentic music can be performed.

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<sup>100</sup> Adorno, "On Jazz," 55.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



As is typical for ‘resigned’ art, jazz music according to Adorno presents dominant ideology in a renewed skin, and in this sense it is an illusion of autonomy and freedom:

[T]he illusion must constantly remain the same while at the same time constantly simulating the “new”. This becomes apparent in the paradoxical demand on the composer that his work always be “just like” and yet “original”, a demand which cripples all productive power.<sup>102</sup>

According to Adorno, the genre remains the same in the sense that it remains an illusion of freedom, however what kind of music is ‘new’ changes over time and so jazz music must also change. For Adorno, this change is not one of authentic artistic production, for the jazz composer does not relate to the material at hands. She does not follow an autonomous law of form, but the composer makes a reproduction of existing material, using the same protocols and tricks in a different way and this way merely simulating the ‘new’. The question for the second part of the chapter, is whether this analysis changes if we take into account the conception of jazz as instant composition. I suggest that it does; for in the contemporary understanding, there is no strict composition in jazz, and so there is no jazz composer in the absolute sense Adorno seems to think. Rather, the jazz *performance* is aesthetically evaluated. Then how can a jazz performance relate to autonomous law of form? And how can it escape this sense of merely being a ‘new’ reproduction of the old?

To elaborate somewhat on this issue, I would like to introduce the concept of “effortless mastery.”<sup>103</sup> Kenny Werner developed a study method for jazz students in the 90s called effortless mastery – by which he understands being able to play and rely on whatever is within your capabilities time and again without having to think about it.<sup>104</sup> The main idea is that

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<sup>102</sup> Adorno, "On Jazz," 54.

<sup>103</sup> Kenny Werner and Jamey Aebersold, *Effortless Mastery* (New Albany: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 1996).

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

making music should, through studying or constant engagement with musical material, become so easy that a musician does not have to think any longer about what she is playing. It should be as easy as talking, walking or using a fork:

You could be talking, making love and doing your taxes and you'd never misuse a fork. In all the hundreds of thousands of times you have used a fork, did you ever miss your mouth? Did you ever poke yourself in the eye or stick it in your ear? Nope, bullseye every time! That's the way it feels to have mastered musical material. Professional improvisers, whether Indian tabla players or be-bop saxophonists, can always access their language in this way.<sup>105</sup>

Significantly, Werner writes about jazz improvisation as if it is a language. Different kinds of improvisation have a certain vocabulary, which can be acquired through internalization. A nice example of this is the famous concept of swing time.<sup>106</sup> Swing is something you only *get* through exposure and through mastering by auditive practise, then improvisers rely on their practical knowledge thereof during their improvisations. Of course, mastering musical improvisation does not mean one should be proficient in all styles of improvisation and have all knowledge. It does mean, however, that the 'jazz masters', such as Avishai Cohen and Yonathan Avishai when playing together, rely unconsciously on a wealth of knowledge about musical material and the performance thereof when improvising music.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Werner and Aebersold, *Effortless Mastery*, 101.

<sup>106</sup> Swing time is hard to explain in words or musical theory to someone who does not know it, because the Western-European musical rhythmical structuring has no way of accounting for it; it is somewhere in between eight notes and the first and last note of a triplet. However, a lot of people around the world use it, for example in traditional jazz music, in Brazilian samba music, in Western-African music, in Eastern-European odd meter music and more. Interestingly, in nearly all music that is not part of the elite, classical (Western-European) musical tradition, there is swing – especially in music that is improvised or connected to dance traditions around the world. Swing tends to emphasize the pulse in music to make it comprehensive and danceable. Some classical music employs it as well, such as the Viennese Waltz. All the genres mentioned use swing in different forms. Some musicologists have done extensive research on the phenomenon, such as Malcolm Braff. Braff has not yet published his research, but his approach is described in Daniel J. S. de Wet, "Malcolm Braff's Approach to Rhythm for Improvisation: Definition, Analysis and Aesthetic," (Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand, 2017).

<sup>107</sup> Werner and Aebersold, *Effortless Mastery*, 99.

In other words, internalization of ‘old’ musical material is a precondition to be able to play jazz music. Not only is internalization needed to be able to relate to the musical material in an autonomous way, but especially so because a jazz musician is to express herself instantly and spontaneously. In jazz maybe more than other music, there is a fine line between reproducing the old, and relating in an autonomous way to historically passed down musical material. In both instances, to do so instantly and during improvisation would require serious internalization of the musical material. That said, arguing that the jazz performance does not add anything to the already existing material, is like saying poetry adds nothing to words: what matters most to the meaning of a jazz performance are the internal relations created within it; it is these relations that ought to be subject to aesthetic evaluation. Thus, although certain types of improvisation have certain vocabularies, it does not necessarily mean that all of them are instances of what Adorno calls standardization. It merely means that a musician has internalized some of the passed-down musical material. Whether it is standardized depends on the relations introduced in a jazz performance. Because Adorno fails to recognize the aesthetic relevance of the composed and improvised relationalities within the jazz performance, he therefore also fails to adequately distinguish standardization from internalization or effortless mastery.

Let me clarify by yet again drawing upon the Cohen case study. Everything Avishai Cohen plays is either freely taken from a pre-given composition or fully improvised. What is improvised is inspired by the setting, the playing of other musicians and the intended meaning of a performance or individual expression. What is improvised is also drawn from internalized, mastered musical material. In this sense, it is always a reproduction of existing material. The only way to differentiate Cohen’s playing from standardized jazz in which this reproduction is done by protocol, or to meaningfully make an aesthetic evaluation of the jazz performance of which Cohen is part, is by assessing the internal relationalities of the performance. For

traditional jazz it says a lot, that all you need to do is turn up at a jam session with a lead sheet, and everybody will know what to do.<sup>108</sup> This is because of the musician's ability to rely on standardized forms that have been the same since the 1920s. This is indeed standardized, and definitely not 'authentic' or autonomous anymore. However, this is not true for the Cohen case study. In this case, what is played is not based on traditions or habit, but comes to be by listening to each other and to the collective performance.

To summarise, contemporary musicians rely on internalized, mastered musical material when improvising. Thus effortless mastery is a precondition to the jazz performance. Simultaneously, musicians listen to what sound is projected in the performance space. Their every next step stands in relation to the material present and already presented in their performance. This explains why jazz musicians train to be absolutely flexible in their playing, but more importantly, it shows how jazz musicians actively listen for what Adorno calls "objective demands" [*konkrete Forderungen*] of the musical material.<sup>109</sup> The result is exactly what Adorno requires from music to be: every note performed is balanced, deliberate and stands in relation to the whole. In jazz improvisation with serious artistic ambitions and skill, as in 'authentic' music according to Adorno, "every detail, even the simplest, would be itself; none would be arbitrarily interchangeable."<sup>110</sup> Adorno writes in "On Jazz" that "analysis [of jazz] may not assume a creative miracle where nothing has really been created."<sup>111</sup> However, contemporary, skilled jazz performance as a whole is most certainly a creative undertaking, making use of and bringing into relation, internalized musical material.

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<sup>108</sup> A lead sheet is a comprehensive page of sheet music, with only the melody and basic harmonic structure of a song written down. It is often used in traditional jazz jam sessions and enables players to play along with songs they are not so much familiar with.

<sup>109</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Reaktion und Fortschritt," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. XVII (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), 107. Originally published in *Anbruch* 12, (1930): 18-21.

<sup>110</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 29.

<sup>111</sup> Adorno, "On Jazz," 52.

## **Jazz and the Contemporary**

In the last part of this chapter, I wish to build upon the key ideas discussed until so far. In the preceding parts of this chapter, I have argued that jazz music should be regarded as a practice in which composition and improvisation stand in relation to one another and together define the form of a jazz performance. These internal relationalities and the way in which artists relate to the musical material within the jazz performance, are what bring meaning and expression to the performance and thus are the appropriate elements for the aesthetic evaluation of the jazz performance. Secondly, I have argued that a trained and skilled jazz musician relies on a wealth of knowledge of historically passed down material and listens actively to the demands of the musical material during a jazz performance. I now argue that on the basis of this, the criteria for ‘authentic’ art as developed in chapter one are more applicable to the creative dynamics of current jazz music and the way in which it behaves socially, than the criteria for ‘resigned’ art. I thus draw upon Adorno’s own criteria regarding authenticity in art, and formulate a reply to Adorno’s critique of early jazz music, by suggesting to make a distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘resigned’ jazz music in these aesthetic terms.

Let me start by returning briefly to James Buhler. Buhler’s reading of Adorno suggests that, in spite of the fact that jazz – like all music – eventually fails to be ‘authentic’ art and that its social content is stabilized by the culture industry, there is no reason to stop playing this type of music. Buhler notes that:

It is not by any means clear that the answer to the stabilization [of the innovative elements in jazz by the culture industry] that Adorno diagnosed is to fall silent, to cease using whatever improvisatory

license, however regulated and limited it may in actuality be, to explore innovative ways of surmounting socially given obstacles.<sup>112</sup>

This “surmounting socially given obstacles” in progressive and innovative ways is then something that ‘authentic’ contemporary jazz music should somehow engage in. Citing Adorno’s *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, Buhler suggests that Adorno is critical of the way the social potential of jazz is neutralized by the culture industry and made into art that hinders critical reflection.<sup>113</sup> Buhler’s message is promising: Adorno’s criticism of jazz is not a dogmatic or essentialist one. Rather, according to Buhler, Adorno is convinced that traditional jazz music was not able to bring about changes in the social realm and in addition was not committed to do so.<sup>114</sup> It is here that the relevance that Adorno still has towards the artistic evaluation of contemporary jazz music becomes clear. For if we understand Adorno’s critique of jazz properly, we see that it is essentially a constructive critique. From the Buhler quote above it is clear that Adorno’s aesthetic theory leaves open the possibility of making ‘authentic’ music based on improvisation. I suggest that some contemporary jazz is indeed committed to critical social engagement through its active engagement with musical material. ‘Authentic’ and serious contemporary jazz music is aesthetically interesting only for its internal play with musical material as discussed earlier in this chapter.

As Buhler reconstructs Adorno, traditional jazz music is not artistically valorised by a practice of social engagement, but instead it is valorised by the skilful dodging of the given social obstacles. This dodging “takes the obstacles matter-of-factly, even cheerfully, [...] as givens that cannot be eradicated and whose presence cannot be questioned any more than the necessity of the beat.”<sup>115</sup> In contemporary jazz, however, as I have argued in the first part of

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<sup>112</sup> James Buhler, "Frankfurt School Blues: Rethinking Adorno's Critique of Jazz," in *Apparitions: Essays on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music*, by Berthold Hoeckner (London: Routledge, 2005), 109.

<sup>113</sup> Buhler, "Frankfurt School Blues," 108.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

this chapter, nothing is musically strictly necessary, which makes the whole metaphor of dodging things complicated. Dodging social obstacles implies that the obstacles are a given, just like the ‘objective demands’ of the musical material, and that they thus exist outside of the musical performance. The focus of jazz performance is to relate constantly to the demands of the musical material within the performance and by doing so, express oneself autonomously through one’s instrument. Even the composition itself is only to be regarded as a suggestion for a collaborative performance in which the internal relations, contrasts, or additions are what counts. In this relating to the musical material, and in contrast with reproduction of musical material by protocol, serious jazz music does not take ‘social obstacles’ or the ‘immanent demands’ cheerfully, but instead musicians listen actively for them and translate them into the aesthetic of the performance. It is thinkable that even in some early jazz this was the case.

I return to the case study for the last time now. In music such as the Cohen case study, the social is connected to the artwork from the start: Cohen stated in his interview that he performs and composes music with social ‘obstacles’ in mind.<sup>116</sup> For example, he performs songs about child soldiers and armed conflicts. These obviously do not find their expression as explicit content, for there are no lyrics or context other than a musical one. This Adorno would also not approve of. Rather, the obstacles are transformed into musical performance. During a jazz performance such as those of Cohen, the story, meaning, or social content of a performance are part of the deliberations of the musicians playing. The meaning may not be immediately clear or very literal to the audience, but during the performance it is one of the defining characteristics of the improvisation. It brings complexity and aesthetics to the performance. The meaning may be hard to interpret from the performance, nevertheless it forms a coherent, balanced whole with the demands of the musical material. This is what makes the music interesting to listen to, and what hits the audience. As Schuiling writes regarding contemporary

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<sup>116</sup> Cohen and Avishai, Interview before their show at the Bimhuis.

jazz, “[t]he aesthetic and the social, and composition and improvisation, [...] in practice do not exclude each other at all.”<sup>117</sup>

Improvisation in general can be regarded as an experimental process of finding and assessing new applications for existing material, because ambitious improvisers like to give new meaning to and relate themselves differently to existing material.<sup>118</sup> In this way, jazz music is explorative and rejuvenates itself. Jazz music redefines itself, its musical material and its social engagement constantly. Adorno typically places jazz in an ahistorical relation to its material, by stating that “time and again [...] jazz became a captive of the culture industry and thus of musical and social conformism.”<sup>119</sup> It would be better for a philosopher “seeking after the historical truth, not the ahistorical, rational essence of phenomena,” to evaluate this relation of jazz music and its material historically.<sup>120</sup> To understand the jazz performance as an ‘authentic’ artform means to see that it includes both improvisation and composition in a dynamic relation. It means recognizing the skill and effort required to internalize so much musical material and to listen and deliberately improvise in relation to the performance as a whole. As a result, it is possible to see that the social engagement of jazz is constantly evolving and shifting, in constant relation to the demands of the musical material and social obstacles raised throughout the entire development of the jazz genre.

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<sup>117</sup> Schuiling, "Compositions in Improvisation," 13.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>119</sup> Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 34.

<sup>120</sup> Jay M. Bernstein, "Introduction," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 7.







# Conclusion

My aim in this thesis has been to formulate a possible reply to Adorno's critique of jazz music. I have provided an explanation of the primary concepts of Adorno's aesthetic theory in chapter one. From chapter one, it is clear that Adorno makes one central distinction, that is to say, the distinction between 'authentic' art and 'resigned' art. Whereas 'authentic' art is defined by its balanced form, 'resigned' art is defined by standardization and production by protocol. The 'authentic' form-type corresponds appropriately and consistently to the 'immanent demands' made by the historically passed down material. As a result, 'authentic' art is enabled to take on the 'crisis of meaning' and can relate critically to the dominant ideology in society. 'Authentic' art then, is an artistic expression of the freedom and autonomy. Conversely, 'resigned' art is not progressive or autonomous; it is rather a form-type based on replication and reproduction. In 'resigned' art something 'new' is made by feeding rules and protocols with a new incentive. It is therefore unable to relate to society in a critical way.

On the basis of these concepts, Adorno has written very critically about jazz music during his lifetime. In chapter two, I have shown that Adorno regards jazz as a type of music that is incorrectly believed to represent liberation, both in social and in musical terms. Jazz seems to represent liberation, but it only does so by departing from, and returning to a dominant system, thereby conforming to the dominant system. Adorno argues that the aesthetics of jazz are characterized by rules, protocol, repetition and standardization: jazz improvisation creates harmonic tension only within the ruling harmonic structure of a song, and always does so using the same vocabulary of clichés and licks. Additionally, in a social sense jazz is presented as entertainment with the aim to lighten the burden of everyday labour, and thus is inherently connected to the capitalist system.

I have presented two readings of this critique. The first reading (e.g. Robinson, Zabel, Brown) draws on the historical context in which Adorno has developed his criticism. This reading argues that Adorno did not understand – and possibly could not have understood – enough of the sociocultural background of the jazz genre. Therefore, according to the first reading, Adorno’s criticism can be rejected by employing a distinction between ‘commercial’ and ‘genuine’ jazz – two categories not unlike Adorno’s own ‘authentic’ and ‘resigned’, but based on sociocultural background. I argue, however, that this distinction between ‘commercial’ and ‘genuine’ jazz must not be made on this basis, but rather in terms of musical aesthetics. Making a distinction on the basis of sociocultural background comes close to racial essentialism, presents little or no reply to some of the well-placed criticisms of Adorno’s writing, and renders the original criteria of ‘authentic’ and ‘resigned’ art meaningless. Moreover, jazz music has become a genre that is performed and produced globally and it thus makes no sense to uphold such a distinction on the basis of sociocultural background.

I therefore endorse the second reading (e.g. Buhler, Wilcock), that attempts to explain Adorno’s criticism by placing it into his theoretical framework as described in chapter one. This reading makes it possible to formulate a philosophical reply to the jazz criticism in terms of the concepts and criteria developed by Adorno himself. I submit that jazz can be understood as a performed artform characterized by ‘instant composition’: the collaborative process of musicians improvising with musical material that can be introduced in different ways (e.g. through reproduction of internalized material, sheet music, otherwise written composition, or objects and people in the performance context). Crucial in this understanding is that ‘instant composition’ exceeds Adorno’s understanding of jazz music. The internalization and reproduction of musical material, as well as the harmonic framework of a composition, are merely optional parts of a larger improvisational process. Jazz should thus be aesthetically

evaluated in terms of the *ad-hoc* created relationalities within the musical material of the performance.

This conception of jazz music enables us to take up Adorno's jazz criticism in a well-understood and constructive way. Through this understanding, it becomes clear in what way jazz musicians relate to their musical material. This is required to adequately assess the 'authenticity' and 'progressiveness' of the jazz artform, because in Adorno's aesthetic theory 'authenticity' is acquired by relating autonomously to the 'immanent demands' made by the musical material. I have argued that certain contemporary jazz music (cf. the music discussed in the Avishai Cohen case study) indeed is able to relate autonomously to these demands. This may well have been the case for early jazz music too, but that would require a currently out-of-scope investigation into the musical material and its demands at the time. The 'instant composition' conception equally enables us to identify 'resigned' or 'commercial' jazz in terms of Adorno's aesthetic theory – performances in which no internal relationalities are developed between musical material, its demands, and the improvisation.

In conclusion, it appears a distinction between 'genuine' and 'commercial' jazz can be made on the basis of Adorno's own concepts of 'authentic' and 'resigned' art. 'Genuine' jazz then is 'authentic' art, which means that not all jazz music is an uncritical reproduction of the dominant ideology – contrary to Adorno's view. Additionally, the value and applicability of Adorno's aesthetic theory to the evaluation of contemporary jazz music becomes clear: not only are we able to employ criteria developed by Adorno to evaluate music performed and created contemporarily, but Adorno's theory may prove inspiring for artists that wish to be socially and critically engaged through their music as well – even in a genre of music of which Adorno himself had never expected it.



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