

Postscript: Adorno Meets Sun Ra

When I wrote “Adorno on Music: A Reconsideration” twenty-seven years ago, I was disturbed by the philosopher’s evaluation of jazz. Throughout his life, Adorno judged jazz harshly, seeing it as the quintessential product of the culture industry. For him, the music was a form of both infantile regression (since it requires no effort to understand) and masochism (because it evokes in the members of the music audience an aesthetic pleasure in their own liquidation as autonomous subjects). The point I made in my article is that Adorno’s experience of jazz was limited to the dance music of the 1920s through 1940s, while he neglected the role of jazz in articulating Black witness and resistance to oppression. Julian Johnson criticized me in print for presuming “a pristine moment when jazz escaped the music industry.”¹ While I do not know if jazz has had any “pristine moments,” I believe that there are periods in the history of jazz that escaped the culture industry every bit as much as did the atonal music of Schoenberg and his school that Adorno championed. Here, I will discuss free jazz – now around sixty years old – not so much to defend myself against Johnson’s criticism as to challenge Adorno’s negative version of utopian aesthetics.

Writing in the aftermath of Auschwitz, Adorno applied the ancient Judaic ban against graven images to any attempt to articulate a positive utopia. According to him, in art as everywhere else, the only defensible utopia is the entirely negative one that tears the mask “from the countenance of false happiness.” This is in part why he endorsed the liberated dissonance of the Schoenberg school; dissonance gives voice to the liquidation of free subjectivity by the “totally administered society,” whether in its fascist or “democratic” form. Since Adorno was not familiar with free jazz, which was developed in small, avant-garde jazz circles during the final years of his life, he was not in a position to know that it also liberates dissonance. However, in so doing, it presents a positively utopian image; that of a liberated society. That is to say, free jazz combines Adorno’s proscription against the easy listening promoted by the culture industry with the development of an affirmatively utopian content that he rejected.

In a remarkable essay he wrote in 1961, Adorno made an “epistemological break” with many of the presuppositions that structured his earlier, voluminous writings on music. The long article, “Vers une musique informelle,” shows that, eight years before his death, Adorno’s reflections on music had begun to take a direction for which nothing in his earlier work could have prepared us.² The change was a response to recent musical developments. As a member of the musical avant-garde of the 1930s, Adorno reflects on the tendency of aging artists to adopt the motto, “Only this far and no further.” In opposition to this tendency, he opened himself to the “a-serial music” of the 1950s, as represented by the work of Stockhausen, Cage, and Boulez. While admitting that there is much in contemporary music that he does not understand, he embraces a-serial (or better, post-serial) music as an authentic response to the problematic development of the Schoenberg school.

For Adorno, the music of the 1950s made an advance over serial, twelve-tone technique. Adorno had long been a critic of serial music. In his judgment, the demand that each of the twelve tones in a tone row be played before any could be repeated imposed upon atonal music an external, artificial, and rigid form, rather than allowing form to develop from the internal logic of the musical material itself. Against the inflexible order of serial technique, Adorno was a champion of Schoenberg's earlier free atonality. In 1961, what he found significant about post-serial music was its embrace of the freedom Schoenberg had abandoned. Of course, this was not a simple return to the early days of the Viennese school. In spite of recurring bouts of aesthetic nostalgia, there is no going back in art. Instead, the reassertion of freedom in music was the work of a new avant-garde that did not neglect the advances of classical atonality, but was nevertheless determined to go beyond them.

In his article, Adorno calls a-serial music, *une musique informelle*. But the word *informelle* has no connection with informality (with light music, for example). It refers rather to the ability of a new music to transcend the constraints of form without abandoning form entirely. A genuinely free music creates formal order from the immanent development of its material, without postulating or responding to a need for order. It refuses to "run for cover," as Adorno says Schoenberg did in adopting the twelve-tone system. However, even form that emerges organically eventually congeals, becoming a barrier to further development. Informal music would recognize this in its resolve to break through the barriers it inevitably establishes.

One of the defining characteristics of *musique informelle* is its rejection of the thematic and motivic elements that persist even in atonal music. When Adorno was writing, aleatory music (Cage) and electronic music (Stockhausen) were the principal attempts to get beyond the domination of theme and motif. It is true that Adorno does not accept the new music without criticism. With respect to aleatory music, his view is that chance must transcend itself by including its dialectical opposite, namely necessity. And he believes that electronic music risks fetishizing technology. Nonetheless, aleatory music loosens the unavoidable constraints of composition and performance, while electronic music vastly increases the range of consciously produced sounds that have musical significance. Adorno regards both as first drafts of the *musique informelle* of the future.

What would Adorno have thought of free jazz, had he been familiar with it? The music was in its earliest stage of development when he wrote his article in 1961. Ornette Coleman was, in a sense, its Schoenberg, John Coltrane its Berg and Webern combined, with Sun Ra playing the role of Stockhausen. All three musicians liberated jazz from bebop, from twelve bar blues, and from the thirty-two bar AABA popular song. In the process, they rejected chord progressions and freed dissonance from tonality. However, Coleman and Coltrane moved in the direction of pure improvisation, while Sun Ra composed his music, which is why he insisted that he was not a free jazz musician. But the name, "free jazz" is a slippery one. Even Coleman's album, *Free Jazz*, which introduced the name to the public (although it did not invent it) has a composed line that the members of the two quartets that perform the piece sometimes follow. It is best to see free jazz as including the whole avant-garde rebellion against

jazz tradition that began in the late 1950s, while regarding Coleman and Coltrane as working in parallel with the aleatory music that emerged in the work of John Cage. However, in spite of his defense of composition, the aleatory principle was not foreign to Sun Ra either, as witnessed by his two performances with Cage, recorded in the album, *John Cage Meets Sun Ra*. Cage's and Sun Ra's collaboration initiated an ongoing convergence of avant-garde classical music and jazz that is alive and kicking a half-century later. Under the title "free improv," European classical musicians pursue pure improvisation. It is now common for American free jazz musicians to play in Europe with free improv musicians, and vice versa. In fact, it is increasingly difficult and sometimes impossible to distinguish between the two kinds of music.

It seems to me that free jazz is also a draft on *musique informelle*, and would been recognized as such by Adorno had he been introduced to it. Like the autonomous music Adorno championed, free jazz requires active, seasoned listening able to follow the complex logic through which the unity of the piece is woven from its apparent fragments. It too privileges dissonance over harmony, and abolishes theme and motif. It also makes use of the supple changes in rhythm Adorno admired in post-serial music. But free jazz does challenge him in one fundamental respect. In "*Vers une musique informelle*," Adorno describes the music of the future as utopian, but without abandoning his proscription against a positive utopia. He does so by characterizing *musique informelle* as an Idea in the Kantian sense, in other words, as a regulative ideal that can never be encountered in experience. Free jazz, however, deviates from Adorno on the topic of utopia. It presents an empirical image of a free society in each successful performance.

In his book, *Aesthetic Theory*, left unfinished at his death, Adorno says that fireworks, which consume themselves at the moment of their appearance, are a paradigm of art. No art form comes closer to this description than improvisational free jazz, for the reason that no free jazz piece can be repeated. Since there is no score, piece and performance are one and the same. Yet in this very ephemerality, free jazz exhibits a freedom in which the individual is not absorbed into the collective, but produces the collective in uncoerced collaboration with others. In a free jazz ensemble, a musician may decide to introduce a new line of development, but that line can flourish only if it is ratified by the other musicians. The complete work is the outcome of a series of such "votes." The freedom of each does not simply adjust to the freedom of others, but constitutes itself in the process through which a collective freedom emerges. We need to distinguish free jazz improvisation from anarchism. The utopia it sketches is a democratic one in which order is neither imposed from the outside, nor emerges spontaneously. The musicians in an ensemble must learn to read each others cues – both visual and auditory – if they are to coordinate their individual performances. Each must be able to grasp the musical ideas evolving in the minds of the other performers if the piece is to develop a unitary idea. For that reason, the idea of practice is not foreign to free jazz, even though the music practiced necessarily differs from the piece that is publically performed. Like the individual and the collective, freedom and discipline are dialectical opposites that achieve a synthetic unity in the free jazz performance.

It is understandable that Adorno, a German Jew who escaped the Holocaust, would insist on a ban on affirmative utopias. The ban is of a piece with his famous judgment that it is obscene to write poetry after Auschwitz. But, like the process of mourning, such proscriptions cannot continue forever. After three-quarters of a century, it is time to write poetry again. And a utopian music, a music that anticipates a free society, is truly the music of any future worth having.

- Gary Zabel
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¹ Johnson, Julian. 2006. "The Elliptical Geometry of Utopia: New Music Since Adorno," in *Apparitions: Essays on Adorno and Twentieth Century Music*. Routledge, New York. 203.

² Adorno, Theodor. 1992. "Vers une musique informelle," in *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*. Rodney Livingston, translator. Verso, London. 269-322.