

UDK 78.01 Adorno

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Adorno as Critics – Mozart, Wagner and Strauss in the Light of the Aesthetic Theory

Adorno kot kritik – Mozart, Wagner in Strauss v luči estetske teorije

Ključne besede: Theodor W. Adorno, glasbena kritika, filozofija glasbe, estetska teorija

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POVZETEK

SUMMARY

Ni dvoma, da Adornovi kritične monografije in eseji o Wagnetju in Straussu, kakor tudi besedilo o Sibeliusu, sodijo med najbolj kontroverzno obravnavane dele njegovega dela. Pomemben razlog za kontroverzno recepcijo je dejstvo, da ti spisi kombinirajo filozofske in glasbene poglede. Za muzikologe tem besedilom manjka podrobna analitična perspektiva; za filozofske gledišče pa so njegovi pogledi preobremenjeni z glasbenimi pojavi. Namen predavanja je umestiti Adornovo glasbeno kritiko v kontekst njegove kritične estetike in filozofije, kakor je zbrana v njegovi Estetski teoriji. Pri tem bo govora o najpomembnejših kriterijih, ki se neposredno nanašajo na kritično perspektivo njegove misli in zadevajo jezik in kulturo v širšem smislu.

Članek ima štiri dele. V prvem bo govora o Adornovih idejah o umetnosti 20. stoletja v splošnem, saj ti teoretski pogledi tvorijo osnovo njegove misli o glasbi in glasbenikih. V drugem delu so v središču pozornosti Adornove zahteve do glasbene kritike. Tretji del pretresa Adornovo kritiko Wagnerja,

There is no doubt, that Adorno's critical monographs and essays on Wagner and Strauss, as well as the text on Sibelius, number among the most controversially discussed parts of his oeuvre. One important reason for this controversial reception is the fact that these writings combine philosophical and musical views. As far as the musicologists are concerned, the texts lack a detailed analytical perspective; from the philosophical point of view on the other hand, the deliberations are too much dominated by musical phenomena. This text, which was written for a lecture held at the Musicology Department of the University of Ljubljana in April 2005, aims at placing Adorno's music criticism in the context of his critical aesthetics and in his musical philosophy respectively, which he summed up in his *Aesthetic Theory*. By doing so the most important criteria, which refer directly to the critical perspective of his thought concerning language and culture in general, shall be focused upon.

The article consists of four parts: The first part will focus on Adorno's ideas on 20th century art in

vzparejajoč njegove poglede do Mozarta. Četrtri in zadnji del predavanja prinaša podrobno analizo dveh Adornovih spisov o Richardu Straussu.

Poleg Adornove Estetske teorije so baza premisleka njegovi spisi o glasbeni kritiki, zlasti predavanje na Inštitutu za glasbeno kritiko in estetske raziskave na nekdanji Akademiji za glasbo v Grazu z naslovom »Refleksije o glasbeni kritiki« (1924 in 1964).

general, for these theoretical thoughts constitute the basis of his thoughts on music and musicians. In the second part, Adorno's demands of musical criticism are placed in the centre of interest. The third part discusses Adorno's critique of Wagner by comparing it to his views on Mozart. The fourth and last part provides a detailed analysis of Adorno's two essays on Richard Strauss.

Beside Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* his writings on music criticism, in particular the paper held in 1967 at the Institute for Musical Criticism and Aesthetical Research of the former Music Academy in Graz entitled »Reflections on musical criticism«, his *Essay on Wagner* and his two papers on Richard Strauss written in 1924 and 1964 serve as textual basis for the following consideration.

I. Adorno's Notion of the Work of Art

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, which he conceived over several years, remained unfinished and was not published during the author's lifetime. Nevertheless, it contains the sum of Adorno's thinking on art. Important aspects explained by Adorno in this work are also essential for his critical thinking on music. Thus it seems useful to also base a reading of his music criticism on this late text. By doing so it is also important to keep in mind that not only Adorno's theoretical thinking on art as a philosopher, but also his practical artistic experience as a composer influenced his thinking to a large extent. Another important characteristic of his critical reflexions is that they are based on his views on new music: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist."¹ This statement marking the beginning of the *Aesthetic Theory* published in 1970 as part of Adorno's bequest provides an apt characteristic of the situation of contemporary composition even from today's viewpoint. "The forfeiture of what could be done spontaneously or unproblematically", Adorno wrote in the following, "has not been compensated for by the open infinitude of new possibilities that reflection confronts. In many regards, expansion appears as contraction. The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure. Instead, the process that was unleashed consumed the categories in the name of that for which it was undertaken."²

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*; transl. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis 1997, 1. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. by Gretel Adorno und Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt a. M. 1970 (Ges. Schr. 7), 9: „Zur Selbstverständlichkeit wurde, daß nichts, was die Kunst betrifft, mehr selbstverständlich ist, weder in ihr, noch in ihrem Verhältnis zum Ganzen, nicht einmal ihr Existenzrecht.“

² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 9: „Die Einbuße an reflexionslos oder unproblematisch zu Tuendem wird nicht kompensiert durch die offene Unendlichkeit des möglich Gewordenen, der die Reflexion sich gegenüberstellt. Erweiterung zeigt in vielen Dimensionen sich als Schrumpfung. Das Meer des nie Geahnten, auf das die revolutionären Kunstbewegungen um 1910 sich hinauswagten, hat nicht das verheißene abenteuerliche Glück beschieden. Statt dessen hat der damals aufgelöste Prozeß die Kategorien angegriffen, in deren Namen er begonnen wurde.“

This passage not only addresses the problem of post-modern lack of orientation discussed nowadays which concerns both artists as well as recipients. By stressing the uncertain condition of art Adorno outlines a basic thought of his philosophy on art: the problematic relationship between an autonomous modern art and reality, the modern individual and society in total respectively: "For absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole. In it the place of art became uncertain."³

Adorno characterised the relationship between reality and art as a dialectical relationship full of conflicts and tensions. Indissolubly linked to the world, art is at the same time bound to criticise the outward conditions. Adorno interprets the processes characterising the inner structure of the single work of art as a formal effect resulting from these tensions between art and reality:

Their immanent processual character – the legal process that they undertake against the merely existing world that is external to them – is objective prior to their alliance with any party. All artworks, even the affirmative, are a priori polemical. [...] By emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, they bear witness that the world itself should be other than it is.⁴

Since the beginnings of musical history the musical work was conceived as a dynamic work characterised by inner processes and motions, not as a fixed entity. Since the end of functional tonality in the beginning of the 20th century, however, the inner dynamics of the work of art increased continually. Further, the novel radicalism of the musical language, which took its departure from the Second Viennese School, was paralleled by a radicalization of the precarious relationship between art and reality. With respect to the historical condition of the world, in the 20th century critique has become an intellectual and ethical obligation. Therefore, from Adorno's point of view, to what extent a work of art denies any sort of affirmation becomes a basic criterion for measuring its truth content. Truth cannot be found by a certain method at a predictable place, but asks for complex aesthetical thinking. Always referring to social truth, artistic truth presents itself as an enigma:

The truth content of artworks is the objective solution of the enigma posed by each and every one. By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection. This alone is the justification of aesthetics.⁵

Experience of art as thought of by Adorno disemboogues nearly inevitably in philosophy. Capturing the truth content of a work of art, however, does not aim at fixing it conceptually. On the contrary, artistic cognition is to be considered as an open cognitional process completely different from conceptual thinking:

The spiritualization of art approaches its enigmaticalness not directly through conceptual elucidation, but rather by concretizing its enigmaticalness. The solution of the enigma amounts to giving the reason for its insolubility, which is the gaze artworks direct at the viewer.⁶

³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 9. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 1: „Die absolute Freiheit in der Kunst, stets noch einem Partikularen, gerät in Widerspruch zum perennierenden Stande von Unfreiheit im Ganzen. In diesem ist der Ort der Kunst ungewiß geworden.“

⁴ Adorno *Aesthetic Theory*, 176f. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 264: „Objektiv aber ist der immanente Prozeßcharakter der Kunstwerke, schon ehe sie irgend Partei ergreifen, der Prozeß, den sie gegen das ihnen Auswendige, das bloß Bestehende, anstrengen. Alle Kunstwerke, auch die affirmativen, sind a priori polemisch. [...] Indem sie von der empirischen Welt, ihrem Anderen emphatisch sich trennen, bekunden sie, daß diese selbst anders werden soll.“

⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 128f. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 193-194: „Der Wahrheitsgehalt der Kunstwerke ist die objektive Auflösung des Rätsels eines jeden einzelnen. Indem es die Lösung verlangt, verweist es auf den Wahrheitsgehalt. Der ist allein durch philosophische Reflexion zu gewinnen. Das, nichts anderes, rechtfertigt Ästhetik.“

⁶ Adorno *Aesthetic Theory*, 122. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 185: „Die Vergeistigung der Kunst nähert ihrem Rätselcharakter sich nicht durch begriffliche Erklärung unmittelbar, sondern indem sie den Rätselcharakter konkretisiert. Das Rätsel lösen ist soviel wie den Grund seiner Unlösbarkeit angeben: Der Blick mit dem die Kunstwerke den Betrachter anschauen.“

Works of art which are true are, according to Adorno, at the same time enigmatic questions and answers which, however, evade a conceptual definition. Therefore cognition of art is but a process, a careful approach, in Adorno's words "a solution of the enigma that at the same time maintains the enigma"⁷. This novel conception of the reception of art comprises a modification of the idea of understanding in general. Hence in the aesthetical experience the process of perception turns into the process of being perceived. In Adorno's theory of art the resistance of art against conceptual definition forms a basic condition of artistic truth. For it is exactly its enigmaticalness due to which art excels in comparison to conceptually fixed cognition: „The truth of discursive knowledge is unshrouded, and thus discursive knowledge does not have it; the knowledge that is art, has truth, but as something incommensurable with art."⁸ Only the experience of the indissolubly enigmatic character of truth, which constitutes a basic characteristic feature of artistic experience, discloses the way to a novel, different form of cognition:

Art becomes an enigma because it appears to have solved what is enigmatical in existence, while the enigma in the merely existing is forgotten as a result of its own overwhelming ossification. The more densely people have spun a categorical web around what is other than subjective spirit, the more fundamentally have they disaccustomed themselves to the wonder of that other and deceived themselves with a growing familiarity with what is foreign.⁹

Art cannot overcome the deficiency of conceptual cognition either. By means of its mimetic, non-violent language however, it discloses a new approach to the other, the objective, which cannot be understood by pure rationality and conceptual definition only.

Art corrects conceptual knowledge because, in complete isolation, it carries out what conceptual knowledge in vain awaits from the non-pictorial subject-object relation: that through a subjective act what is objective would be unveiled. [...] Through spiritualization, the radical domination of nature – its own – art corrects the domination of nature as the domination of an other.¹⁰

In the view of Adorno, art is always a form of behaviour. Therefore, it can be understood as a model for non-violent treatment of the other. Hence artistic experience includes the challenge of an encounter with the other, namely the strange and the unknown. Through the artistic experience the other can be perceived in a novel way. It is exactly this point which constitutes art's importance even in the present day. The novel behaviour which art advocates can also be described as a form of non-violent conciliation, as a careful approach of the non-identical. Adorno's idea of conciliation comprises the idea of a peaceful treatment of nature which is considered human rationality's counterpart. Through the artistic experience, free from the destructive idea of domination, human thinking frees itself from the compulsion of identification by means of identifying itself with the other.

In artworks, spirit is no longer the old enemy of nature: Assuaged, spirit reconciles. Art is no reconciliation in the classicistic sense: Reconciliation is the comportment of artworks by which they become conscious of the nonidentical. Spirit does not identify the nonidentical: It

⁷ Adorno *Aesthetic Theory*, 122. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 185.

⁸ Adorno *Aesthetic Theory*, 126. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 191: „Unverhüllt ist das Wahre der diskursiven Erkenntnis, aber dafür hat sie es nicht; die Erkenntnis, welche Kunst ist, hat es, aber als ein ihr Inkommensurables.“

⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 126. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 191: „Kunst wird zum Rätsel, weil sie erscheint als hätte sie gelöst, was am Dasein Rätsel ist, während am bloß Seienden das Rätsel vergessen ward durch seine eigene, überwältigende Verhärtung. Je dichter die Menschen, was anders ist als der subjektive Geist, mit dem kategorialen Netz übersponnen haben, desto gründlicher haben sie das Staunen über jenes Andere sich abgewöhnt, mit steigender Vertrautheit ums Fremde sich betrogen.“

¹⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 113. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 173: „Kunst berichtigt die begriffliche Erkenntnis, weil sie, abgespalten, vollbringt, was jene von der unbildlichen Subjekt-Objekt-Relation vergebens erwartet: daß durch subjektive Leistung ein Objektives sich enthüllt. [...] Durch Vergeistigung, radikale Naturbeherrschung, die ihrer selbst, korrigiert sie Naturbeherrschung als die des Anderen.“

*identifies with it. By pursuing its own identity with itself art assimilates itself with the nonidentical: This is the contemporary stage of development of art's mimetic essence.*¹¹

Adorno's conception of the process of artistic cognition comprises the idea of a novel form of cognition based on mimesis. One of its most important components is the active involvement of the recipient in the artistic processes.

II. Music Criticism

The above-mentioned central aspects of Adorno's philosophy of art are closely related to his views on music criticism. As far as the latter is concerned, one of Adorno's most important demands is the relevance to music: "If music criticism is intended to be more than feuilleton, orientation and business, it must be demanded, in a certain sense, by music itself, not only by the recipients".¹² According to Adorno, a criticism demanded by the music itself corresponds with the „neediness of the works of art“. This results from their dark, mysterious language which needs critical thinking and philosophy, respectively, in order to unfold its truth content:

*The importance of criticism for the works can be understood best by taking into account that history does not automatically illuminate the truth content of the works of art. On the contrary, the process through which truth and falsehood of a work of art are separated from the casual, historically determined predilection of the audience, is based on criticism, which is bound to provide substantial coherent views.*¹³

Therefore, according to Adorno, valid criticism is understood as a „media of the process unfolding the art“ engaged in the disclosure of the truth content of the works. Ultimately, mediation of the truth content is the goal of any sort of criticism: "Grasping truth content postulates critique. Nothing is grasped whose truth or untruth is not grasped, and this is the concern of critique."¹⁴ The goal of a relevant criticism taking the musical object, the musical work as its point of departure is to "illuminate the musical work" apart from sympathies and antipathies which are caused by chance. Relevance with respect to the truth content of art implies delving into the artistic object, according to Adorno. This process is, in Adorno's opinion, similar to the process of mimetic perception. He demands primarily the faculty to leave oneself to the motion of the work:

*Aesthetical objectivity is a process itself which only the one who is capable to understand the work as a field of force will be able to perceive. Thereto no landmarks are needed. The only necessary prerequisite is that sort of subjective experience which is normally suppressed through general norms.*¹⁵

¹¹ Adorno *Aesthetic Theory*, 134. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 202: „In den Kunstwerken ist der Geist nicht länger der alte Feind der Natur. Er sänftigt sich zum Versöhnenden. Nicht bedeutet sie nach klassizistischem Rezept Versöhnung; diese ist ihre eigene Verhaltensweise, die des Nichtidentischen innerwird. Der Geist identifiziert es nicht: er identifiziert sich damit. Dadurch daß Kunst ihrer eigenen Identität mit sich folgt, macht sie dem Nichtidentischen sich gleich: das ist die gegenwärtige Stufe ihres mimetischen Wesens.“

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, „Reflexionen über Musikkritik“, in: *Symposion für Musikkritik* (= Studien zur Wertungsforschung 1), ed. by Harald Kaufmann, Graz 1968, 8: „Soll Musikkritik mehr sein als feuilletonistischer oder orientierender Betrieb, so muß sie in gewissem Sinn von der Musik gefordert sein, nicht bloß von den Rezipierenden“.

¹³ Adorno, „Reflexionen über Musikkritik“, 8-9: „Man kann die Bedeutung der Kritik für die Entfaltung der Werke daran am besten sich klarmachen, daß nicht automatisch [...] die Geschichte dafür sorgt, daß der Wahrheitsgehalt der Werke sich herstelle, sondern daß der Prozeß, durch den Wahrheit und Unwahrheit der Kunstwerke der schlechten Zufälligkeit der Publikumsgunst und der geschichtlichen Vorlieben entrissen wird, seinen Ort hat in den Begründungszusammenhängen, welche die Kritik bietet.“

¹⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 128. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 194: „Den Wahrheitsgehalt begreifen postuliert Kritik. Nichts ist begriffen, dessen Wahrheitsgehalt nicht begriffen wäre, und das ist das kritische Geschäft.“

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, „Kriterien der Neuen Musik“, in: *Klangfiguren* (Ges. Schr. 16), ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt a. M. 1978, 174: „Ästhetische Objektivität selbst ist ein Prozeß und ihrer wird inne, wer das Werk als Kraftfeld begreift. Dazu bedarf es nicht irgendwelcher Orientierungspunkte, sondern des Einsatzes jener subjektiven Erfahrung, deren Ausschaltung durch generelle Normen die gängige Anschauung befiehlt.“

The crucial point as far as an adequate understanding of the object and the matter itself is concerned is the combination of experience on the one hand, and openness for the message of the work, the continuous readiness to learn something new, on the other hand. Thus, the most important task of the critic is “on the one hand to incorporate all he brings along with him into the present experience of the work; on the other at the same time to correct his former knowledge with the help of the new work; in other words, to achieve a transition from transcendent to immanent, specific critique”¹⁶. Adorno’s comment on Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner also demonstrates his idea of a necessary combination of immanent and transcendent critique. The problems caused by Nietzsche’s text result, according to Adorno, from the fact that Nietzsche

*though surpassing the things happening in Wagner’s music in a certain sense nevertheless was not completely capable of them; for his questions, which reached beyond the sense of the music in order to grasp its truth, did not penetrate the musical cells themselves. [...] Therefore, in some respects, Nietzsche’s superior criteria lack obligation.*¹⁷

Adorno opposes the danger inherent in any form of critique, namely to boil down to ideology, the specific truth of the work of art. Art’s specific quality is to be seen primary in the fact, “that its content traces the status of historically orientated philosophy, the contradictions of the situation respectively, down to the depth of the contradictions to be technically mastered and by representing the contradictions, perhaps already surpasses them.”¹⁸ Critique aiming at this kind of truth will not primarily try to find clear definitions, but discuss contradictions in order to approach the enigmatic questions formulated by the work of art. Adorno’s demand for a critical consciousness corresponds with his placement of art at the rim of society. From his point of view music criticism demands a critical ability of judgement based on the capacity of making oneself “resistant against any established criteria”. Adorno’s conception of criticism comprises critique of the musical language on the one hand: resembling the task of the artist, the critics’ task includes combat against void and empty musical phrases; on the other hand, music criticism reaches beyond music because technical questions and questions concerning the truth content must not be separated from each other. Adorno made unmistakably clear that “who is not critical in the sense that he wants the world to be different from what it is, is not good for criticism”. Music criticism in the sense of Adorno could be defined as a sort of behaviour which aims at doing justice to the nonidentical. This goal implies “a moral obligation to a maximum of differentiation”, the success of which is based to a large extent on the critics’ capacity of verbalization.

III. Wagner and Mozart

The requirements concerning music criticism which Adorno addressed in his theoretical writings also characterise his own critical writings on music. In this respect his essays on Wagner provide a lucid example. Adorno’s monograph is characterised by two divergent perspectives which are nevertheless related to each other: a critical view concerning the

¹⁶ Adorno, „Reflexionen über Musikkritik“, 10: „...das, was er schon heranbringt, einerseits in die Erfahrung der Werke hineinzunehmen, andererseits aber auch, es daran zu berichtigen, also von sich aus den Übergang von transzendenter in immanente, bestimmte Kritik zu leisten.“

¹⁷ Adorno, „Kriterien der Neuen Musik“, 192: „...dem, was bei Wagner geschieht, überlegen und doch nicht ganz gewachsen war, weil sie die Fragen, die über die bloße Erfahrung des Sinnes hinaus auf dessen Wahrheit selbst dringen, nicht in die kompositorischen Zellen selbst hineintrag. [...] Den souveränen Nietzscheschen Kriterien haftet ein Unverbindliches an.“

¹⁸ Adorno, „Kriterien der Neuen Musik“, 192: „... daß sein Sinn den geschichtsphilosophischen Stand, die Widersprüche der Situation bis in die Tiefe der je zu bemeisternden technischen Widersprüche hinein nennt und dadurch vielleicht schon übersteigt.“

technique of the composition and a critique of ideology. Though closely related to basic ideas of his philosophy, both perspectives nevertheless refer to the practical field of music: Adorno's concern is to base his personal ambivalent feelings towards Wagner's oeuvre, his „feeling of irritation“, in the ambivalence of the oeuvre itself; his goal is to justify his subjective experience when listening to Wagner's music by means of objective categories developed through an analysis of the music. In his monograph entitled *Versuch über Wagner*, written in London and New York in 1937/38, Adorno appreciates Wagner's innovations concerning composition techniques, stressing his important role for the development of New Music. On the other hand he vehemently calls into question the entire construction of Wagner's oeuvre, because it is untrue from his point of view. In the first part of the text a principal point of critique is already discussed from different perspectives: „Delight and death become one.“¹⁹ This statement makes clear what Adorno has in mind when talking of Wagner's falseness: it is the withdrawal of the revolutionary tendencies culminating in the affirmation of death which provokes Adorno's objection. From Adorno's point of view this tendency towards resignation, towards affirmation of reality resulting from weakness, also corresponds with Wagner's inclination to establish a consensus with the audience which characterises the large-scale rhetorical gestures of his music. This consensus however, is not based on „a conciliation aiming at living together, but on the shared acceptance of the inevitable fate dominating man's life“²⁰. Wagner's inclination to accept the destructive forces, the fatal end, according to Adorno, also influences the musical structure of Wagner's works which suffer from a lack of balance between expression and construction. Therefore Wagner's music also lacks liveliness. The positive counterpart which Adorno refers to several times is Mozart. In Mozart's music the gestures are not „repeated obsessively“, but are „expressive without mediation“. Wagner's „infinite melody“, on the contrary, does not unfold in a really free and copious manner, as the term suggests, but in comparison with Mozart Wagner's melodic invention is relatively poor. Despite this vehement criticism Adorno does not neglect the revolutionary traits by which Wagner distinguishes himself as a modern composer who even outdoes Mozart. Besides the innovative instrumentation, the „emancipation of the colour“, which anticipated techniques of New Music, Adorno stresses in particular the denial of all given categories, the lack of established systems, the nearness to musical prose and the dissolution of the material which characterise Wagner's works. The composer's treatment of contradictions however, which arise from these innovations and which are attributes of quality from Adorno's point of view, is again characterised by resignation, by a certain ideological position. In this respect Adorno talks of a „resignation of the music as far as time is concerned“. Ultimately, due to totality, which is the composer's final goal, the contradictions fall back to nothingness, immolated for the benefit of a false totality which neglects the individual and the nonidentical: „Wagner creates the ritual of a permanent catastrophe. His unbridled individuality condemns the individual as well as any individual order to death“²¹. In order to rescue the totality of the entire construction, the individual is given away. In this respect once again, Mozart provides the contrasting background for Adorno's argument: „Mozart's unity, by contrast“, is in Adorno's words „not characterised by identification, but by configuration“²². As a whole, Adorno's critique of Wagner

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, in: Theodor W. Adorno, Ges. Schr. 13, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt a. M. 1971, 13: „Lust und Tod werden eins.“

²⁰ Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 57-58: „... nicht die Versöhnung zu gemeinsamem Leben, sondern die tödliche Fügung, der beide gleichermaßen verfallen sind.“

²¹ Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 114: „Wagner ersinnt das Ritual der permanenten Katastrophe. Sein losgelassener Individualismus spricht übers Individuum und dessen Ordnung das Todesurteil.“

²² Cf. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 99.

is a critique of the negative metaphysical content of his works, which Adorno characterised as follows: "The metaphysical principle of senselessness is presented as the sense of the senseless empirical reality."²³ Through its „gesture of becoming silent“ the music affirms the impending fate. By doing so, it renounces „the deep critique inherent to opera during the entire epoch characterised by the rise of the bourgeoisie, namely the critique of myth“²⁴. This point of critique can be illuminated again by a comparison of the Wagner-Essay with Adorno's ideas on Mozart. In his Mozart essay entitled „Huldigung an Zerlina“ Adorno wrote: Representing the ineffable Mozart's music anticipates „the utopian condition“. Thus it becomes a „parable of history standing still“. And again it is the musical experience which serves Adorno's thought as a point of departure: "In the postlude of Mozart's orchestra disunited mankind seems to be reconciled. Such reconciliation takes place in the name of freedom."²⁵ In „Versuch über Wagner“ however, Adorno writes: „Freedom has no place with Wagner.“²⁶ By glorifying death as inebriation, Wagner praised death as the highest good.

As central passages of Adorno's writings on Mozart and Wagner clearly demonstrate, Adorno's judgements are based on the same perspectives: The question to what extent the artistic conception is true is of central importance in both Adorno's Wagner-Essays and his texts on Mozart. Further, the idea of an emancipation of mankind, which from Adorno's point of view is inevitably linked with adequate artistic creation, is in the centre of interest. Hence, from Adorno's perspective, the promise of an emancipation of mankind never redeemed so far by reality is the still unresolved problem also passed on by tradition to contemporary art. Therefore his judgement of Wagner, which finally becomes a positive judgment, is based on his conviction that Wagner's music ultimately overcomes the negative ideology. In *Tristan* as well as *Parsifal*, according to Adorno's interpretation, the music expresses the sufferings of the individual. In this respect again the music's relationship with death is a basic point of Adorno's argument. The culmination of the catastrophe comprises at the same time the germ of a possible salvation, according to Adorno, for the sacrifice of individuality through death finally overcomes the cause of the individual's separation which makes life ultimately hopeless, as Adorno explained: "Dying in love also means accepting the limits of possession and property as far as the human being is concerned."²⁷

The point of view from which Adorno criticises historical compositions is that of new music in the tradition of the Schoenberg School. Due to a more radically historical perspective resulting from the traumatic experiences of the 20th century's historical catastrophes new music adopted a rough, inaccessible character. It shares a romantic longing with the 19th century, however, a strong inner impulse and the continually increasing grief resulting from the distance between reality and the ideal of reconciliation, which is nevertheless still binding. This ideal, which can also be described as a reconciliation of subjectivity and objectivity, was musically represented by the Viennese Classical Masters; Mozart is quoted by Adorno as a representative of this group.

²³ Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 134: „Das metaphysische Prinzip der Sinnlosigkeit ist als Sinn des sinnlosen empirischen Daseins hypostasiert.“

²⁴ Cf. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 118.

²⁵ Adorno, „Huldigung an Zerlina“, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Moments musicaux* (Ges. Schr. 17), ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt a. M. 1982, 35: „Im Nachspiel von Mozarts Orchester scheint die entzweite Menschheit selber versöhnt. Solche Versöhnung hat im Namen der Freiheit statt.“

²⁶ Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 135: „Freiheit [...] hat bei Wagner keine Stätte.“

²⁷ Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 143: „In der Liebe sterben: das heißt auch, der Grenze gewahr werden, die der Eigentumsordnung am Menschen selber gesetzt ist.“

IV. Richard Strauss

Adorno's judgement of Strauss can also be explained by means of confronting the texts with main ideas of Adorno's philosophy. The point of departure of Adorno's critique of Strauss and his first main point of critique is the observation of a certain attitude, a special sort of liberality, which Adorno interprets negatively as self-confidence which is too strong. This attitude comprises on the one hand "freedom from bigotry and prejudices in the sense of Nietzsche", on the other hand however, "recklessness, violence and superficiality". According to Adorno these features also characterise the musical gestures in Strauss' works. Though combining ethical and artistic criteria explicitly, Adorno nevertheless is not interested in the personal qualities of the composer Strauss. Comparing Strauss's attitude with that of an "idealised industrial magnate" he demonstrates that his ambivalent evaluation of Strauss results from his intention to combine music criticism with social criticism. Adorno criticises the increasingly dominating attitude of capitalistic society, destroying everything which resists its domination. This attitude corresponds with that of the composer who, like Strauss, dominates his material without any restriction. As a result of this attitude the music is characterised by a structural lack as far as the shape of details is concerned. Although this lack is balanced through a concentration on the macro form and on the large gestures of the music respectively, nevertheless an imbalance to the disadvantage of the individual detail remains. Adorno characterised this imbalance as "a lack of precision as far as the details are concerned which the composer accepts in full awareness in order to concentrate on totality". The imbalance between the totality of the work and its details resulting from the imbalance between the autonomy of the material and the creative dominance of the composer is the main point of Adorno's critique of Strauss. What Adorno is missing in Strauss's oeuvre is the balanced combination of construction and expression, through which, from his point of view, the work of art becomes an adequate paradigm of a successful balance between totality and its parts. Ultimately, the unrestricted domination of the technique of the composer induces a loss of expression:

*Proud of being able to master any problematic situation within the work, Strauss' technique gains complete independence from the object. This pride is paralleled by the solidification of what is conquered by the technique: the lively feeling of the soul.*²⁸

Due to his unrestricted dominating power the composer sacrifices, according to Adorno, the capacity of expression of the autonomous subject preserved by the autonomy of the details. A precise explanation of the ideal of expression which constitutes the background of Adorno's critique of Strauss is found in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Artistic expression, as understood by Adorno, is neither purely subjective speech, nor imaginary objectivity; it is a novel, mimetic form of expression foreshadowing a successful relationship between society and the individual.

*Through expression art closes itself off to being-for-another, which always threatens to engulf it, and becomes eloquent in itself: This is art's mimetic consummation. Its expression is the antithesis of expressing something.*²⁹

The composer's change of attitude, which Adorno noticed with Strauss, not only changes the expressive character of the music, but also its content: By "moving according to the mood

²⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, "Richard Strauss", in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Klangfiguren*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt a. M. 1978 (Ges. Schr. 16), 569: „Straussens Technik verselbständigt sich gegenüber der Sache. Ihr Stolz ist, jeglicher Situation innerhalb des Komponierten gewachsen zu sein. Parallel dazu geht die Vergegenständlichung dessen, was Technik in den Griff nimmt, der seelischen Regung.“

²⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 112. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 171: „Durch den Ausdruck sperrt sich die Kunst dem Füreinandersein, das ihn so begierig verschlingt, und spricht an sich: das ist ihr mimetischer Vollzug. Ihr Ausdruck ist der Widerpart des etwas Ausdrückens. [...] Die neue Kunst bemüht sich um die Verwandlung der kommunikativen Sprache in eine mimetische.“

and the will of the composer”, the music becomes the paradigm of a “merciless physiognomic power”. Consequently, Strauss was the first to describe musically the separation of sex and soulful eroticism by representing Eros as nothing but pure lust, as Adorno noted with respect to *Salome*. Due to the specific quality of the detail the music of Strauss gains a semi-objective, dramatic impact, described by Adorno as follows: “The details are not expressive emotions of the composer, but of latent dramatic characters.”³⁰ Whereas Strauss assembles heterogeneous elements which are combined in a stylish, balancing manner, Adorno’s formal ideal aims at unity within heterogeneity. Its most characteristic feature would be non-violence, as he explained in his *Aesthetic Theory*:

*Reason, which in artworks effects unity even where it intends disintegration, achieves a certain guiltlessness by renouncing intervention in reality, real domination; yet even in the greatest works of aesthetic unity the echo of social violence is to be heard; [...] The aesthetic unity of the multiplicitous appears as though it had done no violence but had been chosen by the multiplicitous itself.*³¹

Adorno’s critique of the composer’s immoderate technical domination of the musical material suppressing subjective expression in favour of semi-objective representation is based again on social criticism. The critique of Strauss is at the same time a critique of a positivist attitude which was also a characteristic feature of bourgeois science in Strauss’s time:

*Neither the anti-metaphysician Strauss unmasks metaphysics as ideology, as his mentor Nietzsche did, nor does the sound of Strauss’s music comprise any sign of sadness referring to metaphysics’ futility. His sounds bustle in nothing but reality as multi-coloured shimmering fish in water.*³²

The attitude Adorno criticises in Strauss and his compositions is that of conformity. What seems to be a personal comment at first sight is once again intended to be critical of contemporary issues:

*In Strauss’s attitude the well-behaved son survives who permits himself much, but not too much; his fearlessness, bravery thrives in a kind of security the foundations of which must not be shaken even mentally.*³³

This conformity resulting from a lack of strictness ultimately leads to an orientation towards the impact of the music. The goal of this attitude is to overwhelm the listener. By doing so the music adopts traits of “terror”. The background of this argument is again Adorno’s ideal of art which can be found in the *Aesthetic Theory*. From his point of view, true art is characterised by the power of standing, its delight is the delight of resistance including the “contradiction against the universal ware character”. Adorno located “without any doubt” Strauss’s affirmative position first in *Elektra*. This position demonstrates how little the common judgement - that Straus was progressive until *Elektra* and became conservative after - corresponds with Adorno’s differentiated criticism.

A second basic reproach results from the first one: the reproach of being untrue. As did the reproach of conformity, the reproach of untruth primarily refers to the form and the gesture of the music. Corresponding with the artistic tendencies of the epoch, Adorno locates in Strauss

³⁰ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 16), 569-570: „Nicht aber sind die Details, als Ausdrucksregungen, die des kompositorischen Subjekts, sondern solche latenter dramatis personae.“

³¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 134. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 202: „Indem die Vernunft, die den Kunstwerken noch, wo sie Zerfall meint, Einheit erwirkt, auf den Eingriff in die Wirklichkeit, auf reale Herrschaft verzichtet, gewinnt Vernunft etwas Schuldloses, obwohl noch den größten Produkten der ästhetischen Einheit das Echo der gesellschaftlichen Gewalt anzuhören ist; [...] Die ästhetische Einheit des Mannigfaltigen erscheint, als hätte sie diesem keine Gewalt angetan, sondern wäre aus dem Mannigfaltigen selbst entraten.“

³² Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 16), 575: „Weder jedoch verklagt der Antimetaphysiker, wie sein Mentor Nietzsche, Metaphysik als Ideologie, noch ist dem Straussischen Ton auch nur die Spur des Leidens an ihrer Vergeblichkeit beigemischt. Seine Klänge tummeln sich im bloß Seienden wie buntschillernde Fische im Wasser.“

³³ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 16), 567: „Im Straussischen Duktus überlebt der brave Sohn; viel gestattet er sich, aber nicht zuviel; seine Kühnheit gedeiht in einer Sekurität, deren Basis nicht einmal im Geist erschüttert werden darf.“

a tendency towards stylisation, which he interprets as an inclination towards disguise, ultimately as a lie. Strauss's music seems to be quasi "ethically obliged to make itself different, smarter than it really is". The untruth of the music as far as the style is concerned also influences the musical content, according to Adorno. This is made clear by the endings which Adorno characterised as problematic: "Strauss's forms remain unconfirmed." This specific quality demonstrates the contradiction between the content which is quasi quoted and the structural absence of the content.

According to Adorno the content of Strauss's music is its vitality, its liveliness. As the vitality was formed by the will of the composer, as it were by force, instead of emerging on its own, the music reflects the false liveliness of reality. The content's lack of substance is also a result of the fact that the objectivity of the music is a false one, because it is created willingly by the subject of the composer. Thus Strauss's works suffer from a lack of content which emerges as a lack of vitality described by Adorno as follows: "Strauss's music becomes limp as soon as the composer loosens the reins and takes confidence in its strength."³⁴ A similar critical interpretation of the content of Strauss's music can already be found in Adorno's first essay on Strauss. In 1924 he wrote: "The subject of his music is life."³⁵ The idea of life which Adorno found with Strauss is "life as the ultimate goal": "As the immanent life is the subject of Strauss's music, the bearer of his music is that man whose soul, having failed in the relationship to God, is satisfied in itself: the psychological 'I'."³⁶ Painting a lively picture of life by force, the composer deceives as far as the condition of reality and his own condition are concerned, which are less autonomous than the music shows them to be. Outlining a false picture of life – Adorno calls it "phantasmagorical" – Strauss gives away the chance to foreshadow a different, a true picture of vitality. The semblance of his art is not the appearance of the truth, but false semblance. The background of this argument is constituted by the explanations concerning the semblance of art Adorno summed up in his *Aesthetic Theory*, namely his ideal of truth as the semblance of the illusionless:

The seal of authentic artworks is that what they appear to be appears as if it could not be prevaricated, even though discursive judgement is unable to define it. If however it is indeed the truth, then along with the semblance truth abolishes the artwork. The definition of art is not fully encompassed by aesthetic semblance: Art has truth as the semblance of the illusionless. The experience of artworks has as its vanishing point the recognition that its truth content is not null.³⁷

How does Adorno finally confute these grave accusations? According to his dialectical way of thinking, which also characterises the reasoning of his *Aesthetic Theory* and his monograph on Wagner, Adorno interprets positively in his Strauss Essay exactly those points he criticised before, in order to turn the initially negative picture into a positive one. Whereas the negative points demonstrate clearly the social criticism the author aims at, the positive aspects demonstrate the important role of musical experience in Adorno's thought.

First, the novel way of objectivity, of outwardness is interpreted by Adorno as a form of protest against an inwardness which has become impossible. Already in 1924 Adorno defended Strauss against the reproach of superficiality:

³⁴ Adorno, "Richard Strauss" (Ges. Schr. 16), S. 595-396: „Straussens Musik erschläft, sobald er die Zügel lockert und ihr selbst vertraut.“

³⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, „Richard Strauss“, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Musikalische Schriften V*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Klaus Schultz, Frankfurt a. M. 1984 (Ges. Schr. 18), 254: „Der Gegenstand seiner Musik ist das Leben.“

³⁶ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 18), S. 254: „Wie das immanente Leben der Gegenstand von Straussens Musik ist, so ist der Träger seiner Musik jener Mensch, dessen Seele, aus der Beziehung zu Gott entsunken, sich rein in sich genügt: das psychologische Ich.“

³⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 132. Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 199: „Das Siegel der authentischen Kunstwerke ist, daß, was sie scheinen, so erscheint, daß es nicht gelogen sein kann, ohne daß doch das diskursive Urteil an seine Wahrheit heranreichte. Ist es aber die Wahrheit, dann hebt sie mit dem Schein das Kunstwerk auf. Die Bestimmung von Kunst durch den ästhetischen Schein ist unvollständig: Wahrheit hat Kunst als Schein des Scheinlosen. Die Erfahrung der Kunstwerke hat zum Fluchtpunkt, daß ihr Wahrheitsgehalt nicht nichtig sei.“

From the limitations of the nervously sensual an external appearance results that cannot be dismissed as superficiality [...]. The depth of his music is based on the fact that the music is superficial, that it hovers loosely on the surface of the world, instead of hunting in vain for an unreal inwardness and by doing so neglecting the fragmented rest of the outward reality.³⁸

Second, Adorno revises his judgement concerning the evaluation of the form. It is exactly the form which is unsuccessful which he considers as productive in a novel manner. Adorno considers one of Strauss's greatest merits that he adapted the term "sketch" for use in the field of music. Another aspect of the form which from Adorno's point of view contributes to Strauss's evaluation as a pioneer is that he realised the aleatorical principle in the field of tonal composition; ultimately, his oeuvre is characterised by destruction. In Adorno's words: "His idea of unity fulfilled itself through decay"³⁹. In this respect Adorno interprets newly the vivacity, the verve of Strauss's music, which he had interpreted as a sign of lacking substance before.

One would almost like to interpret Strauss's concerns about fluidity as a compensation for the fact that only fragments remain after the expiration of tonality's power of organising form. [...] as if the musical language no longer vouches for formal sense.⁴⁰

This aspect of Adorno's considerations too can already be found in the text written in 1924, where Adorno commented on the specific character of Strauss's endings: "Life questioned the form, opened it and refused it to end."⁴¹ Demonstrating the quality of Strauss's endings Adorno took the scene of the maids in *Elektra*, which he considers to be a prerequisite for the operas of Berg, as an example. The formal excellence which the composer proved here, demonstrates another attitude than the dominating one criticised before, namely a human attitude "expressed in a postlude of only a few bars through which the composer mourns over the maltreated maid by rounding the wildly fragmented scene through means of a futile epilogue; afterwards the line of the basses reaches the Elektra chord."⁴² In this music Strauss reaches a degree of freedom comparable to Mozart, according to Adorno. The lightness and ease of the music result from the loose bonds between the single sound occurrences. A prerequisite is the vivacity, the permanent fluidity of the music.

The processes of destruction and dissolution found in Strauss's works led to a novel quality of presence of mind in each single moment. Whereas the failed endings demonstrate the phantasmal appearance of the music, according to Adorno, the presence of mind characterises the successful beginnings. Strauss is, in Adorno's words, "the master of the first 250 bars", as the scene of the fortune teller in *Arabella* or the beginnings of *Salome* and *Elektra* prove. Following Adorno's interpretation, the quality of the moment is also made clear by the copious contradictions, as for instance with the chord of recognition in *Elektra* or in the third act of *Rosenkavalier* with the entrance of the marshal's wife: "Such moments musicaux are messages of a not yet existing future of the modernism of Strauss, which is not always avant-garde, as

³⁸ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 18), S. 256: „Aus der Begrenzung auf Nervisch-Sinnliches ergibt sich eine Äußerlichkeit, die nicht als Oberflächlichkeit abzutun ist. [...] die ganze Tiefe seiner Musik ruht darin, daß ihre Welt selbst ganz Oberfläche ist, daß sie auf der Oberfläche der Welt lose schwebt, anstatt in vergeblicher Jagd nach dem selbst ganz unwirklichen Innen den Rest einer wenngleich fragmentarischen Wirklichkeit des Äußeren aus Händen zu lassen.“

³⁹ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 16), S. 588: „Seine Idee von Einheit realisierte sich im Zerfall.“

⁴⁰ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 16), S. 588: „Fast möchte man die Straußsche Sorge ums Fließen als Kompensation dafür interpretieren, daß nach dem Erlöschen der formorganisierenden Kraft der Tonalität nur Fragmentarisches übrig ist. [...] wie wenn die Sprache der Musik keinen Sinnzusammenhang mehr verbürgte.“

⁴¹ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 18), S. 259: „Das Leben hat die Form fraglich gemacht, sie geöffnet und ihr das Ende verwehrt.“

⁴² Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 16), S. 589: „...mit der Strauss durch ein Nachspiel von wenigen Takten der mißhandelten Magd nachtrauert und mit dem flüchtigen Epilog die anscheinend wild zusammengestückte Szene rundet, eher der Gang der Bässe den Elektra-Akkord erreicht.“

far as the material is concerned.”⁴³ Adorno himself stresses, as the quote shows that the future is not to be identified with material progress. He also stressed that „there is no direct link between the progressive sounds and the progressive ideas with Strauss”.

The domination of the music by the will of the composer constituted another critical point; the capacity of the music to rise above the omnipotent will of the composer is an important point concerning the rehabilitation of Strauss. Adorno observed this phenomenon in *Elektra*. From his point of view, the scene of Clytemnestra, which he considers to be the climax of Strauss’s work, is characterised by “runaway music”.

Finally Adorno invalidates the grave reproach of untruth, the reproach of falseness. The illusionary appearance of the music resulting from simulated vivacity finally disguises itself. Thus, it turns into truth, as Adorno explained: “Spontaneity produced by technical means is Strauss’s magic formula; the naivety however, through which he lets us see the act of illusion finally revoked, reconciliates.”⁴⁴ Throwing away its vivid appearance the music turns into a sign of vanity unmasking as impossible the vitality presented as autonomous before. Adorno wrote in 1924: “The transience of man in the permanent stream of time is Hofmannsthal’s subject and Strauss’s mystery.”⁴⁵

Adorno’s evaluation of Strauss is based on the one hand on ideas which characterise his philosophy of music; on the other hand his considerations are determined by practical musical experience. His judgement is a differentiated discussion of different aspects of Strauss’s music. Adorno’s last word on Strauss, which resembles his judgement of Mozart and Wagner in this respect, results from a complex perception of the music. At the same time it can be interpreted as a hint for its reception comprising the question of solidarity with “metaphysics in the moment of its fall”. This key question characterising Adorno’s culture criticism also constitutes the background for his critique of Strauss.

*Only he will understand Strauss who understands the murmuring beneath the noise which can be heard like an unarticulated question in the last bars of Don Juan: the music’s truth content. Maybe only at the moment of death, can what is perhaps different from death be perceived: inextinguishable experience in decline.*⁴⁶

⁴³ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 16), S. 594: „Solche moments musicaux sind Botschaften einer immer noch ausstehenden Zukunft an die Straussische Moderne; dabei keineswegs stets dem Material nach avanciert.“

⁴⁴ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 16), S. 606: „Unwillkürliches als Produkt von Technik ist die Straussische Zauberformel; die Naivität aber, mit der er die Karten auf den Tisch legt und den Illusionsakt widerruft, versöhnt.“

⁴⁵ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 18), S. 261: „Die Vergänglichkeit des Menschen in der fließenden Zeit ist Hofmannsthal’s Thema und Straussens Geheimnis.“

⁴⁶ Adorno, „Richard Strauss“ (Ges. Schr. 16), S. 606: „Der jedoch erst verstünde Strauss, der das Gemurmel unterhalb des Rauschens verstünde, das unartikuliert fragend, in den letzten Takten des *Don Juan* vernehmbar wird, seinen Wahrheitsgehalt. Einzig in der Neige vielleicht schlägt sich nieder, was anders wäre als sterblich, unauslöschliche Erfahrung im Zerfall.“