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# Joseph Weiss, "The Dialectics of Music: Adorno, Benjamin, and Deleuze"

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**Joseph Weiss.** *The Dialectics of Music: Adorno, Benjamin, and Deleuze*. Bloomsbury 2021. 200 pp. \$115.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350174962); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350244078).

The title of Weiss's book readily brings to mind Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1947) and the former's *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* and *Philosophy of New Music* (1949). Adorno's thinking—in particular, his critique of humanity's domination of, and alienation from, nature in capitalist modernity, leading to the seemingly irreconcilable split between subject and object, nature and history—by and large lays the premise for the book's dialectical approach to explicating the tensions between social, historical, and anthropological forces underpinning the material and formal content of music. The Adornoian perspective is placed in dialogue with those of Benjamin and Deleuze, two philosophers for whom art (and music) occupy a rather important position in their philosophical inquiry. As a constellation of interrelated fragments, Weiss's book seeks to probe the tensions and contradictions underlying the ontological existence of music in the modern world: if music, *à la* Marx, does not simply function as an anesthetic distraction for the working class, keeping the repressive regime of capitalist exploitation out of their consciousness; if music is not to be employed by the state apparatus to perpetuate certain ideologies that reify mass consciousness as a means of subjugating them to the despotic regime; if music, instead, has the power to recuperate and revivify what is alive in us—our ability to create and innovate, to think and reflect upon and beyond the unquestioned laws and status quo—how then should music uphold itself in our modern society such that it can engage with the natural or social reality and potentially occasion real transformations? What is the responsibility of music for humankind, especially for the modern subject?

The reduction of this book into several main theses can hardly do justice to the plethora of insightful ideas throughout Weiss's elegant and poetic prose. I would briefly point out three respects in which this book stands out from its predecessors. First, by bringing the three philosophers into a shared intellectual terrain, Weiss allows their divergent philosophical ideas to engage in dialogue with one another—sometimes one idea may complement and enrich another, while at other times they may confront each other in the form of contradiction—and precisely in the latter case that, as Weiss suggests, '[t]he irreconcilability between these thinkers is itself a moment in the movement of negative dialectics' (x). Secondly, this book explores a repertoire beyond those discussed in the original writings of Adorno, Benjamin, and Deleuze, ranging from traditional classical works such as Brahms and Wagner, the blues and jazz of Charlie Patton, Elizabeth Cotton, and Deford Bailey, to contemporary works composed by Luigi Russolo and Michael Gordon, extending the purview of musical investigations into further territories of contemporary music-making. Lastly, the book picks up on Benjamin's essay on technology and interrogates the roles technological advancement plays in music creation. Inasmuch as both Adorno and Deleuze did not expound explicitly (or positively) on the issue of technology, this book attempts to elaborate on their philosophical commentary on art with a consideration of the revolutionary force afforded by technology: on the negative side, technology inadvertently turns living-labor into dead-labor, and human subjects into objects; yet it



nevertheless possesses the potential to grant humankind new sensorial possibilities that can precipitate an escape, or a line of flight, beyond the limits and confines of our reified consciousness and the rigidified social structure—‘[t]he poison already contains the healing antidote’ (120).

The book is divided into three sections, or zones of intensities, forming a triptych; each section is titled ‘Excursus,’ hinting at the composition of the book as a series of digressions, extensions, and differentiations from the three philosophers’ conceptual frameworks. Each section revolves around a particular musical style or genre, explained within the context of the particular social and political situations in which the music is enmeshed. The nexus of tensions between musical elements and social-historical forces are analyzed through thought-provoking philosophical ruminations informed by ideas from the three thinkers. The first section, ‘Excursus I: From the Lullaby to Electroacoustic Music,’ focuses on humankind’s domination of nature and its subsequent alienation from it. Viewing the lullaby as a remembrance of our primordial state of being with nature, Weiss postulates that the sense of the lament encapsulated by the lullaby in nineteenth-century music reflects, as its negative image, the irrecoverable separation between man and nature in modernity. This song of sorrow (*Trauergesang*), a reminder of human’s relatedness to nature, is preserved through history and manifests itself in a different guise in modern electroacoustic music—here the song of birds that sing the lament is transformed into the sound of nature (*Naturlaut*), which acts as a deterritorializing force that usurps the organized musical surface, suggesting a ‘de-differentiation of humans from nature’ (32). This liquidation of pre-ordained musical modalities into noise and silence is further abetted by technology, making perceptible what has been inconspicuous, repressed, or excluded.

Humans’ desire to dominate nature through reason, resulting in the antagonism in virtue of the proclaimed individuated autonomy of the human subject, is further actualized in the dialectical relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, a topic addressed in the second section, ‘Excursus II: The Sorrow Song of Nature.’ The sorrow of Black people, subjugated under the domination of the colonizer, is embodied in various styles of blues and jazz music, which possesses a ‘double consciousness’ constituted by ‘a resignation that acquiesces to the prognosticated sentence’ and ‘the onward that endures or, despite the unbearable odds, holds out hope for the promised land’ (54). Focusing on non-orthodox ways of singing (scatting) and instrument playing (guitar slides), blues and jazz musicians seek to go beyond the signification of language and tap into the emancipatory power of sounds—the ‘becoming-instrument’ of the voice and the becoming-bird of the instrument (59). These deterritorializing tendencies inherent in blues and jazz are not immune to further capturing, or reterritorializing, forces of commodification under the capitalist regime, evident in the standardization of jazz styles for greater appeal to the mass market. This dialectic between conformity and freedom, between standardized twelve-bar song form and authentic improvisation, subsists, as irreconcilable forces, in different substyles and experimental attempts of blues and jazz across history.

Humankind’s domination of the Other, when equipped with instrumental rationality, reaches its calamitous extremity in Auschwitz, where subjects were taken as objects under total subjugation. Humans’ inclination to violence and annihilation becomes the subject matter of the third section of the book, ‘Excursus III: Music after Auschwitz.’ When human consciousness is reified to such a

degree that our thoughts and actions are absolutely conditioned and chained by reason and rational laws, and when society is so consolidated under the body of the despot that everything deviant is excluded or even obliterated, the only escape is either willful resignation or total destruction. The latter contributes to the Freudian death drive that seeks to undo the stultification and rigidification of our imprisoned psyche under an all-pervasive system of social relations, or ‘Second Nature.’ Contemporary music, if it does not remain oblivious to the human suffering originating in the interminable oppressive regime of domination, should, on one hand, confront this history of violence and the original guilt underlying every human being, and, on the other hand, envisage a new social order. It can do this by ‘find[ing] a way to lock arms with others and, ipso facto, begin transforming, begin taking up, the debt that has hitherto been impossible to bear’ (119). In the same vein, Weiss claims that art should ‘live up to both the victim’s torment and her corresponding dream’ (124), to remember the past and envisage a better future. This section ends with an extended reading of Michael Gordon’s *Decasia* (2002), the soundtrack composed for Bill Morrison’s film of the same title, as an illustration of his standpoint as applied to music criticism—a musical portrayal of a ‘cosmological and terrestrial calamity’ evocative of the traumatic experience of Auschwitz, concealed within the musical surface the ‘unconscious remembrance of the sorrow of nature’ (147).

*The Dialectics of Music* is like a Deleuzian Idea, where divergent and sometimes conflicting social, philosophical, and musical phenomena are brought together into zones of intensity, where the clusters of interrelated singularities congeal around an intensive black hole at the center. The contradictions presented within or between these fragments—like windowed monads—are probed and scrutinized dialectically to reveal the vicissitudes between difference and consistency in the evolution of natural-history and musical styles. By combining Adornoian negative dialectics and Deleuzian rhizomatic multiplicities, this book offers anyone interested in philosophy and/or music an experience much like what Barthes calls *jouissance*, where thought rubs against itself to provoke further thinking that compels us to delve deeper into the ‘truth’ of reality.

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