

SHORT LOA

Essays on Music

THEODOR W. ADORNO

Selected, with Introduction, Commentary, and Notes

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New translations by Susan H. Gillespie

Why Is the New Art So Hard to Understand?¹

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have posed the question why the new art is so hard to understand with a generality that immediately compels an explanation and a justification. You may object that neither is there a new art *per se*, in an intellectual context in which artistic efforts of every type overlap, nor can it be said of this new art, which does not exist as such, that it is hard to understand. I speak, therefore, only of that art which all of you experience as specifically modern in the sense that it is accompanied by the shock of its strangeness and enigmatic form, the shock that is actually the basis of all the talk about its being hard to understand. The catchwords expressionism, constructivism, futurism, cubism, atonality, surrealism—as empty, banal, and programmatic as they appear—may remind you of that shock as it was manifested at the time those artistic tendencies were emerging. Also—and this is precisely why I posed the question so vaguely and generally—I do not want to speak intrinsically about the conditions for the difficulty of understanding as we may encounter them in each of the various artistic tendencies individually. This would not only require a great wealth of detail, but would also, of necessity, lead deep into the discussion of professional problems that surely hold no interest for many of you—without even the possibility of coming up with a salient and uniform answer as a result. I pose the question from the outset, therefore, not for art itself and its concrete form, but for the public that finds itself confronted with it. I am asking sociologically, not aesthetically; I would almost like to direct the question to you yourselves, why you, as I may assume in your great majority, understand the new art with difficulty. Arguments like the cliché that the new art speaks to the understanding, while the old one also has to do with the emotions, to which it “gives” something, I take, in this context, as a symptom of the existing

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situation, by no means its explanation. For apart from the fact that the concepts "emotion" [*Gefühl*] and "understanding" [*Verstand*], by-products of the great philosophy of an earlier era, should not be allowed to pass without having to show their visa, all they say here is that the older art possesses a certain immediacy of effect that makes it understandable, while this immediacy is no longer present in the new art, and hence some kind of helping operations are required in order to penetrate into its center. The immediacy here is one of effect, not content—in other words understandability itself. The phrase about emotion and understanding is merely an unexamined and skewed reflection of the fundamental experience of the difficulty of understanding new art, namely the experience that the production of art, its material, the demands and tasks that confront the artist when he works, have become divorced in principle from consumption, i.e., from the presumptions, claims, and possibilities of comprehension that the reader, viewer, or listener brings to the works of art. When someone talks about the self-conscious specialization of modern artists, or when some Philistine rants against the ideal of *l'art pour l'art*—an ideal that supposedly always coincides with decadence and degeneration and other nefarious things—what he means is nothing but the alienation of production from consumption, the nowadays completely radical reification of all art, which removes it from immediate use and hence from immediate comprehensibility. The prevailing critique of this state of affairs usually presumes an isolated aberration—hence correctable by means of a so-called "recovery"—that is supposed to have something to do with some shortcomings in the psychic makeup of modern artists, who are said to be rootless and alienated from nature. What is important, however, is, first, to acknowledge the necessary character of the situation itself, to grasp the fact that the roots nowhere reach deeper into the situation than in the case of so-called rootlessness. The reification of art is the result of a socioeconomic development that transforms all goods into consumer goods, makes them abstractly exchangeable, and has therefore torn them asunder from the immediacy of use. The autonomy of art, its quality of being a law unto itself, the impossibility of arranging it at will according to the dictates of use, is, in contrast to the religious and ceremonial function of earlier artistic practice, the expression of that reification. It is a reification that we accept more or less lightheartedly where even consumer products retain something of their use value, but that is profoundly disturbing and denounces the entire situation as soon as the possibility of use vanishes entirely, and art, instead, wants to be seen merely as a mysterious sundial from whose face one imagines one can read the state of consciousness,

without, oneself, any longer having power over it. To describe how this alienation came about would be nothing less than to sketch the history of our society. At a minimum, however, the enforced character of the situation can be seen in the fact that it scoffs at any correction coming from art—precisely because art is socially produced. The artistic products of a highly rationalized society can no more be made to revert to natural ones than the society itself can. The demand that art be designed to be generally understandable is, however, identical with the demand for this kind of reversion. That such reversion must remain dubious in its truth content, that the return to peasant and folk art in a country that is in the midst of the industrialization process leads to costumings and concealments of all kinds, but never to compelling production, is self-evident. It is all the more self-evident because in the face of liberated, emancipated consciousness bonds dissolve, are seen to be illusory, even where they are still present as such. They wither up even without being expressly attacked. If art is unable to recapture the lost character of immediacy, it is a result not of general cultural-philosophical awareness—which, ultimately, could always be contradicted by reality—but of the genesis of the production problems of art itself. For the process of differentiation, the progressive difficulty of artistic solutions, does not come from the private intellectual state of mind of the individual artists; nor does the social situation express itself mystically in the incomprehensibility of the works of art. Rather, technical differentiation, and with it the increase in difficulty, derives from the rationalization of the process of artistic production, namely from the fact that the artist, robbed of all prescribed norms, has to ask with every measure that he writes, every square centimeter of paint that he applies, whether it is right in just this way and just this spot. But the answer to this ceaseless questioning—in the material, and quite independent of the intellectual and emotional state of mind of the artist—is coterminous with differentiation and thus with increased difficulty. Perhaps I may elaborate with the help of the material to which I am closest, music. Attempts to simplify art music are not characterized as bad because they somehow fail to correspond to some general "situation," but rather because they are in contradiction to the material; because the chords, which are built in many layers and do not have a given function within a given key, cannot be repeated as arbitrarily as the old ones; or because rhythms that are constructed irregularly in themselves, as models, cannot be combined into regular, symmetrical forms. This differentiation does not exist in a vacuum, it is true; it is valid only relatively, as applied to the material. But the material itself is historically produced, and it is not possible to diverge

at will from the material. Otherwise, those artists who want to escape from differentiation would be operating in an unbroken, immediate fashion using older material. But one can observe everywhere that this is not possible for them; that they hardly even try; that, where someone actually operates with older material, it is less the intention of the new simplification that is at work than an old and outmoded primitiveness. Thus the artists are forced to confront a difficulty, a differentiation, and hence at first an incomprehensibility from which they can escape only abstractly, namely programatically and literarily.

Now, you may raise one weighty objection to this. If the reason for the difficulty of understanding the new art is located in the social conditions themselves, then—you will argue—it must transcend [*aufheben*] itself. For then the society that, through its own structure, makes the differentiation of artistic means necessary would, itself, have to be so differentiated that the understanding even of the most complicated art causes it no difficulty. The objection, plausible as it sounds, is conceived in a vacuum; above all, it is conceived undialectically—what I mean is that it is conceived without taking into account the real contradictions of the reality in which we live. The separation of production and consumption has precisely this objection for art: that no equivalency such as is formulated by the use, [certain] developments impose themselves upon it, impose themselves socially as well, without these developments being connected, any longer, to the consciousness that actually prevails in the society. In a similar fashion, the development of mathematics may at one point have been produced socially by bourgeois autonomy, by the technical natural sciences, and yet, precisely within the logic of the principle of autonomy, have become ever more separate from society's understanding, become ever more "special." This dialectic is the real reason for the irreversibility of the artistic difficulties. Especially a view that interprets art radically in its social contingency must not believe that a phenomenon like reification and the difficulty of understanding art can be sublated [*aufgehoben*] in an isolated way; rather, such a view must know that serious change in this area can only emanate from the social conditions. But art that lays claim to immediate general comprehensibility and social equivalency, on the basis of existing reality, necessarily possesses an ideological, concealing function. The social situation can be formulated even more concretely. *Production* behaves in a largely historical-dialectical fashion, to the extent that it expresses the tensions and contradictions of the existing relations, suffers its own fate subject to their forces, and through its fate, which may not be concealed,

calls for change. *Consumption*, however, largely lags behind in unchanging existence, because it is does not possess the force of production, which would point beyond what is unchanging; socially it is merely produced, without itself seriously helping to produce—at least in the aesthetic realm—and only mirrors relations whose primary need is to maintain themselves. The difficulty of understanding the new art has its specific basis in this necessity of consumer consciousness to refer back to an intellectual and social situation in which everything that goes beyond the given realities, every revelation of their contradictions, amounts to a threat. For this reason, the really useful art, which serves [the purpose of] distraction—entertainment reading and kitsch prints, sound film and hit dance tunes—is historically innocent and, despite all apparent timeliness of content, formally on a technical level that is long out of date. Here one might argue that the negative eternity of kitsch corresponds to a similar one of consumer consciousness; that it was always thus and not otherwise; that production always outstrips consumption. One can readily concede the tension between the two. Despite this, there is an unmistakable difference between the situation of contemporary art, for example, and the music of Wagner or the painting of impressionism at the time of its emergence. At that time, the lines connecting producers and consumers had not yet been cut, as it were, but merely wired in a more complicated way. But the image of material reality that impressionism ultimately brought forth was not different in principle from the one in which people existed on a daily basis, and in Wagner the preexisting schema of a harmony, which always grows out of tension and resolution, did not emerge from the work itself, but was still carried by social tradition. Hence the shock of incomprehensibility that went out twenty years ago from expressionism or cubism and especially from the futurist manifestoes was something qualitatively different from the agitation over Wagner's supposedly wrong notes, or the supposed daubings of the impressionists. The shock that accompanied the new artistic movements immediately before the war is the expression of the fact that the break between production and consumption became radical; that for this reason art no longer has the task of representing a reality that is preexisting for everyone in common, but rather of revealing, in its isolation, the very cracks that reality would like to cover over in order to exist in safety; and that, in so doing, it repeis reality. Here the psychological question could be asked with some prospect of success. The lack of understanding toward the new art can probably be said—like every stupidity, perhaps—to be based essentially on a mechanism of repression. Historically, the new art goes beyond a reality that it does not,

after all, have the power to change at will; while ideologically, reality itself must remain at a certain point in its own development, in order not to endanger itself. Its subconscious authorities, which perceive the threat in the new phenomena, secure themselves by proscribing understanding and calling a halt that is masked, after the fact, as resistance against intellectualization, abstraction, experiment, and whatever all the fine words may be.

From this dialectical situation, knowledge has conclusions to draw. Despite the insight into the compulsory character [of the process], it cannot be denied that the separation of art from reality endangers art itself. For even if art remains secluded, off by itself, it threatens to become ideological—to be self-satisfied in a muffled, petit bourgeois way, to forget its supportive human function, ultimately to become petrified into bad guild-manship. But the danger cannot be overcome by arbitrary adaptation to the state of social consciousness, at the cost of aesthetic quality. Such adaptation, as has been suggested, is always tantamount, in a practical artistic sense, to a reversion to older, outlived and outdated ways of proceeding, and to take this path art would have to sacrifice the consciousness of itself—a sacrifice that cannot be expected of it. The economic production of the future can no more return to primitive, pre-division-of-labor forms of production, in order to avoid the alienation of human beings from consumer goods, than art can. This holds true no matter whether one is asking art to revert romantically to old forms of community, or, more logically, is denying art its right to exercise control over itself. For even the radicalism of such a procedure seems to have limits. The tension between guild-like, encapsulated art, on the one hand, and, on the other, the true *Gebrauchskunst*² that acquires its ease of understanding only by renouncing the rational through-construction of its production process—this tension cannot be resolved within art; it is established by the [social] relations within which we exist. But the problem does not, by any means, automatically disappear in other ways of life, either. In Russia, they thought at first that they could resolve it with the primitivism of peasant attitudes, and they rejected, as bourgeois, all art that was not immediately capable of being put to use. Today, they seem to have recognized that this was a case of leading production backward to an outdated standard of society, as was admittedly suggested by the preponderance of the agrarian population in Russia. They are beginning to cease their peasant-folkloristic efforts, and to demand work on contemporary material—contemporary, that is, in a rational, European sense. So far, the attempts to eliminate the difficulty

of the new art have all made one mistake. Although they have occasionally acknowledged the dialectical character of production, its historical movement in contradictions, they always still think of consumption in its broad extent as static and unmoved. Although this static quality can certainly not be denied in the current situation, it may by no means be conceived of as an immutable law of nature. For example, if the disposition of work and leisure time were different than [it is] today; if people, independent of cultural privilege, could spend their leisure time occupied substantively and extensively with artistic matters; if a demonically precise mechanism of advertising and anesthetization did not, in every instant of their leisure, prevent them from occupying themselves with actual art—then in principle, the consciousness of consumers could be changed in such a way that they could understand new art without the new art having to be dumbed down on that account. The argument that the public wants kitsch is dishonest; the argument that it needs relaxation, at least incomplete. The need for the bad, illusory, deceptive things is generated by the all-powerful propaganda apparatus; but the need for relaxation, to the extent that it really—and today with justification—exists, is itself also a product of a circumstance that absorbs people's strength and time in such a fashion that they are no longer capable of other things. Let no one come back with a rejoinder about the slothful nature of human beings. For the suspicion is not so easily allayed that the consciousness of the person who responds in this way is more slothful than those on whose behalf he is responding.³

(1931; GS, vol. 18, pp. 824–31)

Translated by Susan H. Gillespie

NOTES BY RICHARD LEPPER

1. Adorno adapted his title from the essay by Alban Berg, "Warum ist Schönbergs Musik so schwer verständlich?" first published in *Musikblätter des Anbruch* in 1924, on the occasion of the composer's fiftieth birthday; reprinted in Willi Reich, *The Life and Work of Alban Berg*, trans. Cornelius Cardew (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), pp. 189–204, given as "Why is Schönberg's Music So Difficult to Understand?" Berg's essay is built around the opening ten bars of Schoenberg's First String Quartet in D minor. Adorno had clearly digested this essay in detail; resonances between his essay and Berg's are obvious. That Berg's discusses Schoenberg's "difficulty" in terms of an early (1904–05) tonal work is, of course, intentional.

2. *Gebrauchskunst* has no exact English equivalent; "use art" or "functional art" is about as close as one can get. Adorno is playing off of the term *Gebrauchsmusik* coined in the early 1920s, and in widespread use immediately thereafter; the term referred to music that makes claims to having social utility, hence differ-

entiate itself from *l'art pour l'art* aestheticism and the musical avant-garde. New music composed especially for musical amateurs, including for performance in the home, fell under the conventional meaning of the term; such music was often characterized by its relative simplicity and restrained expressiveness. Adorno tended to regard the results as more craft than art and as typical of a music that is ultimately concerned to keep faith with respectability and decorum. Adorno saw in the practices and function of *Gebräuchsmusik*, and what he here calls *Gebrauchskunst*, a link with what he would later name the Culture Industry (art in service of the broadcast and film industries, for example), on the one hand, and art as propaganda, on the other (what Adorno criticized in Brecht). Hindemith, as the most important composer of *Gebräuchsmusik*—despite his own eventual rejection of the term—was subject to a sustained critique in Adorno's writing on this account, but especially in his lengthy essay "*Ad vocem* Hindemith: Eine Dokumentation," *GS*, vol. 17, pp. 210–46, assembled from sections (most of which had previously been published) written in 1922, 1926, 1932, 1939, 1962, 1967, and 1968; and Adorno, "Gebrauchsmusik" (1924), *GS*, vol. 19, pp. 445–47.

3. Cf. Adorno's lecture-essay, "Difficulties," Part II (1966), this volume, pp. 644–79, much of which reconsiders the subject of this essay.