# Adorno, Philosopher and Composer. On the Occasion of his piano pieces

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for Klaus Schulz

The composer Adorno stands eclipsed, today, by the shadow of his alter ego the philosopher. After his return from exile Adorno achieved renoun as the author of the *Minima Moralia* and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* - the latter co-authored with his friend Max Horkheimer -, two of the key philosophical works of the age. Although the professor of Philosophy and of Sociology, the director of the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung, and even more so the author Adorno were public figures, the *artist* Adorno was nothing of the kind, though one could argue that here too he was every bit as deserving of acclaim. Adorno in his early years had devoted himself equally to music and to philosophy, and he steadfastly refused to favour one over the other. Even after the war he wrote that he had „had a life-long feeling" that „in [these] divergent areas he was, in effect, pursuing one and the same thing"[2].

As both the son of a singer and the nephew of a singer, he could read notes, he used to say, before he could read the letters of the alphabet; the earliest of his piano pieces that have been preserved is the work of a seven-

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2 Adorno, letter to Thomas Mann. 5.7.1948.

teen-year-old. His first composition and piano teachers, during the Frankfurt days, were Bernhard Sekles and Eduard Jung; later, in Vienna, from 1925, it was to be Alban Berg and Eduard Steuermann. Though occasionally performed before 1933, more frequently since the fifties, Adorno's music never did make it into the established concert circuit. If the series of piano lieder cycles no doubt comprises the bulk and the most important part of Adorno's compositional oeuvre, there is much more: he composed pieces for orchestra, chamber music for strings and a chapel choir, he instrumented Schumann piano pieces for a small orchestra, and he did adaptations of French folk songs. Of all this only the *Sechs kurze Orchester-stücke*, op. 4, the score of which was published by Ricordi in Milan in 1968, appeared during Adorno's lifetime. When after his death all the larger music publishing houses in the Federal Republic rejected his compositions, it was the Munich publisher 'text + kritik' - which until then had specialised in literary criticism - which finally took cognizance in 1980. Under the editorship of Heinz Klaus Metzger and Rainer Rühm they put out a two-volume edition of those pieces which Adorno himself held in high favour to the end. Even now, 30 years after the death of the composer, a good third of Adorno's music which has been preserved - including, to start off with, all of his pieces for piano - remains unpublished.

Everything other than an amateur composer (a category represented, for all that, amongst the philosophers by no lesser figures than Rousseau and Nietzsche), Adorno suffered considerably under the indifference with which his own compositions were treated. That his teacher Berg praised him, in 1926, after the première of his *Zwei Stücke für Streichquartett*, op. 2, as a full member of the *Second Viennese School* to the head thereof[3], was small consolation, no matter how much it may have gratified him at the time. All too clearly he had recognized that the predominant „[d]epartmentalisation of the intellect exercises its influence all the more effectively, against whosoever may reject this division of labour" and that the latter, in obeying only his own principles "exhibits weaknesses which are indis-

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3 c.f. Berg's letter to Schönberg of 13.12.1926: "The performances of Wiesengrund's incredibly difficult quartet was a *coup de main* for the Kolisch Quartet, which learned it in 1 week and performed it quite clearly. I find Wiesengrund's work very good and I believe it would also meet with your approval, should you ever hear it. In any event, in its seriousness, its brevity, and above all in the absolute purity of its entire style it is worthy of being grouped with the Schönberg school (and nowhere else!)" (*The Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*. Selected Letters, ed. Juliane Brand, Christopher Haily, Donald Harris; New York, London 1987, p. 355.)

solubly linked to his moments of superiority"[4]. What has been objectively rent asunder: the knowledge of Being by the concept on the one hand - Philosophy as binding interpretation of reality - and the fragmentation into images or elements of images from which a non-Being, an aesthetic symbolism could be built, is not something which is within the power of the individual subject to reassemble into a coherent whole. The division into mental and physical work, once a precondition for the development of the intellect in its earlier forms, does more than deform the work of the intellect; ineluctably it pushes the latter towards ideology, towards objectively necessary false consciousness. Within each individual this societal division of labour manifests itself thus - according to Adorno's insight -, that theory and art converge in their truth content, but with the proviso that this conversion is to be had only at the price of a strict abstinence, within each sphere, with respect to the procedures and techniques of the other. Not inconceivable that an insight such as this contributed to Adorno's decision to cease composing after 1945.

None knew better than he that aesthetic theory was *theory*, not in itself aesthetic; that theoretic content, where it enters untransformed into works of art, will as much rob the latter of their substance as it is itself smitten with theoretic inadequacy. The listener need hence not fear, in Adorno's compositions, an encounter with a 'philosophy-of-music' kind of music. Adorno, who rarely spoke of his own music - and then with the utmost reserve, almost shamefacedly - once wrote that he „forgets, when [he] composes, literally everything which he had ever thought about it" - to add, dialectically: „without, hopefully, actually forgetting it"[5]. This could hold especially for the piano pieces, which take up, in their turn, a special place in his compositional work. They have, to date, been performed exclusively by María-Luisa López-Vito, who was able to decipher them from the often poorly legible manuscripts preserved in the Adorno archive. After performing the première of the 1924 *Drei Klavierstücke* at the 7th *Festival of Contemporary Music* at Bozen in 1981, she played the remaining piano pieces at subsequent concerts in Berlin, Palermo, Aachen and Mannheim, Hamburg and Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Marbach and Darmstadt. During today's concert Adorno's compositions for piano will be heard for the first time in their totality - crowned by a finale, performed publicly for the first

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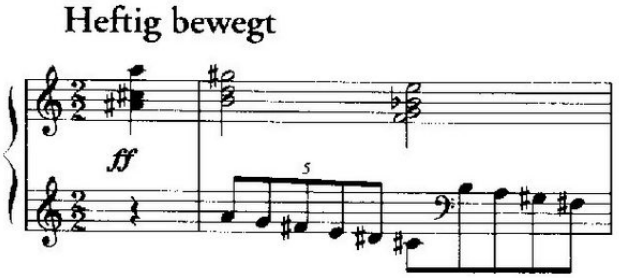
4 *Gesammelten Schriften* 4, p. 21.
5 Adorno, letter to Elisabeth Lenk of 9.11.1964.

time, of a composition which the barely eighteen-year-old Adorno noted down in Kampen in 1921, during a vacation of which not much more is known than that he shared it with the author of *Tonio Kröger*, whom he followed „unnoticed during a long walk“ in the dunes[6]. If vague analogies be permitted, one could perhaps hear, in this epic music, a reminder of Thomas Mann’s beach walks. The most important pieces, the by no means easily decipherable *Drei Klavierstücke* of 1924, will be repeated at the end of the concert. Not only because there is - seen superfically - a paucity of material will Adorno’s piano compositions be played together with piano works by Schönberg, Berg, Webern and Steuermann, but because one thus places them in the context in which, according to their own inner organisation, they rightfully belong.

Adorno seems not to have cared much to have his piano pieces counted among those works on the basis of which he wanted to be judged as composer. To articulate „what’s never been expressed before“ - a motif he ascribed to Schönberg’s piano pieces[7] -, seems not to have been Adorno’s own ambition in his piano compositions. A glance at the handwritten scores shows that they are all first drafts - with, incidentally, remarkably few corrections. The second of the two early pieces, the première of which will be heard this evening, was - like the *Kindersuite* of 1933 -, jotted down in sketchbooks, jumbled up together with school homework exercises, with studies in counterpoint, with a miscellany of other notes. The *Drei Klavierstücke*, dedicated to the pianist Maria Proelss, with whom he was close (though she never performed it), were written down, as if to emphasize their evanescence, with a soft pencil which in many places is already much smudged. Everything is written, as the exact dating shows, within a very short period of time - in contrast to Adorno’s other compositions, on which he worked (as Schönberg remarked, not without a teasing undertone) for months, if not for years. If Adorno himself at times complained, coyly, about the length of time it took him to produce his compositions, this is not something at any rate which can be said of his pieces for piano. If these lack almost completely every quality of the exemplary, the typical, then all the more so does the composer „as it were anticipate himself“[8], something he wrote, in a different context, of the great piano literature of the past. (And in that way relativising his notion of its unparalleled novelty).

6 Adorno, letter to Thomas Mann of 3.6.1945.
7 c.f. *GS* 28, p. 42.
8 op. cit.

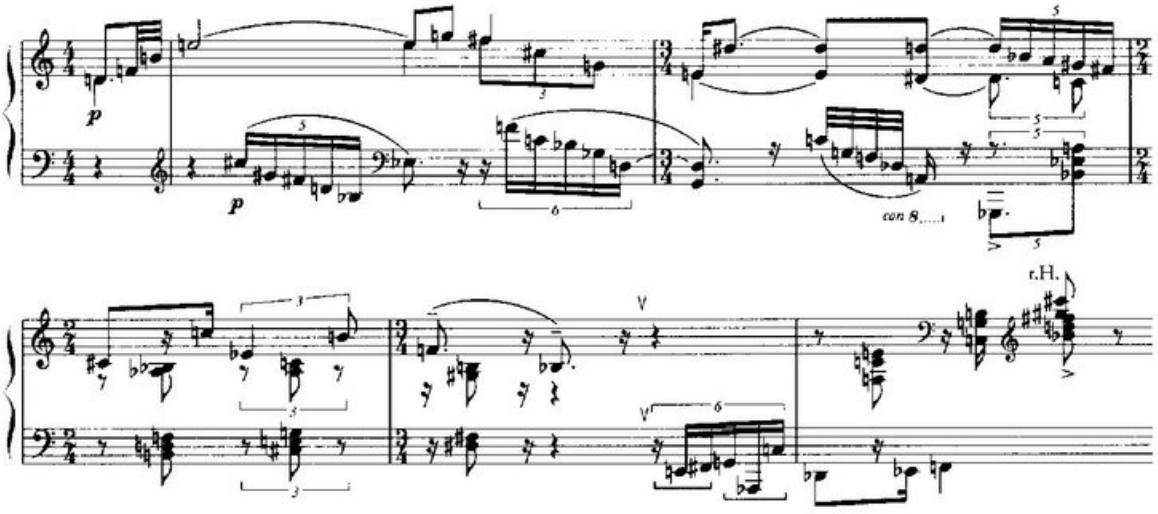
For his own music the piano may have had a comparable function to the one pen and ballpoint had for his writing, and with which he filled countless notebooks: namely to fixate spontaneous ideas which would then be worked out in an authentic form at some later date - often in a quite different context, and sometimes years later. It would fit in with this that many of the piano pieces are incomplete, whether wittingly or not. Thus the earliest piano piece of 1920 carries the roman numeral 'I', without there being even the hint of a corresponding 'II' anywhere. The *Drei Klavierstücke* for Maria Proelss, which Adorno himself grouped into a cycle[9], were meant to have been extended by at least a fourth, of which the final notes have been preserved.




The piano has, as it were, done its duty when it has helped the composer gain self-clarification.

Adorno's piano pieces seem to have been created more or less on the spur of the moment, and if one were to seek a common denominator for them it would perhaps be emphasis on the coincidental, the fixation of the spontaneous and the fleeting. If Adorno was concerned, in his numbered Opera, with objective form, then his piano pieces by contrast remain more strongly in the realm of the subjective, the recitational, the speculative. Not infrequently Adorno would return, at some later date, to work on a piano piece: for instance, as in the case of the pencilled score for Maria Proells, to add a titlepage in ink; or – in the case of the first of these pieces written in 1924 – to return to it even in the fourties for revision. In this instance it was a most peculiar reworking in which the voluminous sheets of the first draft, originally entirely sound-oriented - the 'tone' of which is clearly reminiscent of Berg's op. 1 -, are condensed, to experiment, from the vantage point of the later Webern; overtrumping as it were expression with construction. No coincidence that this revision never got beyond the sixth beat:

9 All the other cycles of Adorno pieces were put together by the pianist.




It fits with this that Adorno had the first drafts photographed, in later years - therein seemingly reversing, objectively, their fleeting and ephemeral character.

Where things got serious for the composer Adorno, in his own compositions, he sought to pick up the thread which Schönberg had initiated with free atonality in the period shortly before the First World War, and which was elaborated upon by the latter's pupils Berg and Webern. In the Berg-pupil Adorno there are then unmistakeable elements of nostalgia, which impart to his own compositions - written at a time when the Second Viennese School had already passed on to compose with twelve selfreferential tones - something of the dejectedly harking back to the emancipatory potential of atonality: as is certainly the case in the opus-numbered piano lieder, in the orchestral pieces op. 4, and in the string quartet op. 2. Not only in the piano pieces alone, which one should perhaps regard, in the first instance, as a kind of musical diary. In part they still move in (or have returned to, as one prefers) the sphere of tonality, albeit of an ironically broken kind which does not quite take itself seriously and hence seeks, with each beat, to be its own parody. One has to have experienced the friends Adorno and George Solti singing hits from the twenties - in a Silser pub in the woods for five-o'clock tea, to the accompaniment of a coffee-house violinist - not to be all that put out by the *Hommage à Bizet* or the *Böhmischen Terzen*. Like Adrian Leverkühn, whose music for that matter comes mostly from Adorno, the latter also was much too enamoured with that kind of "organised noise" for him not, on occasion, to have lent the keys of his much-loved Steinway to the articulation of the unabashedly

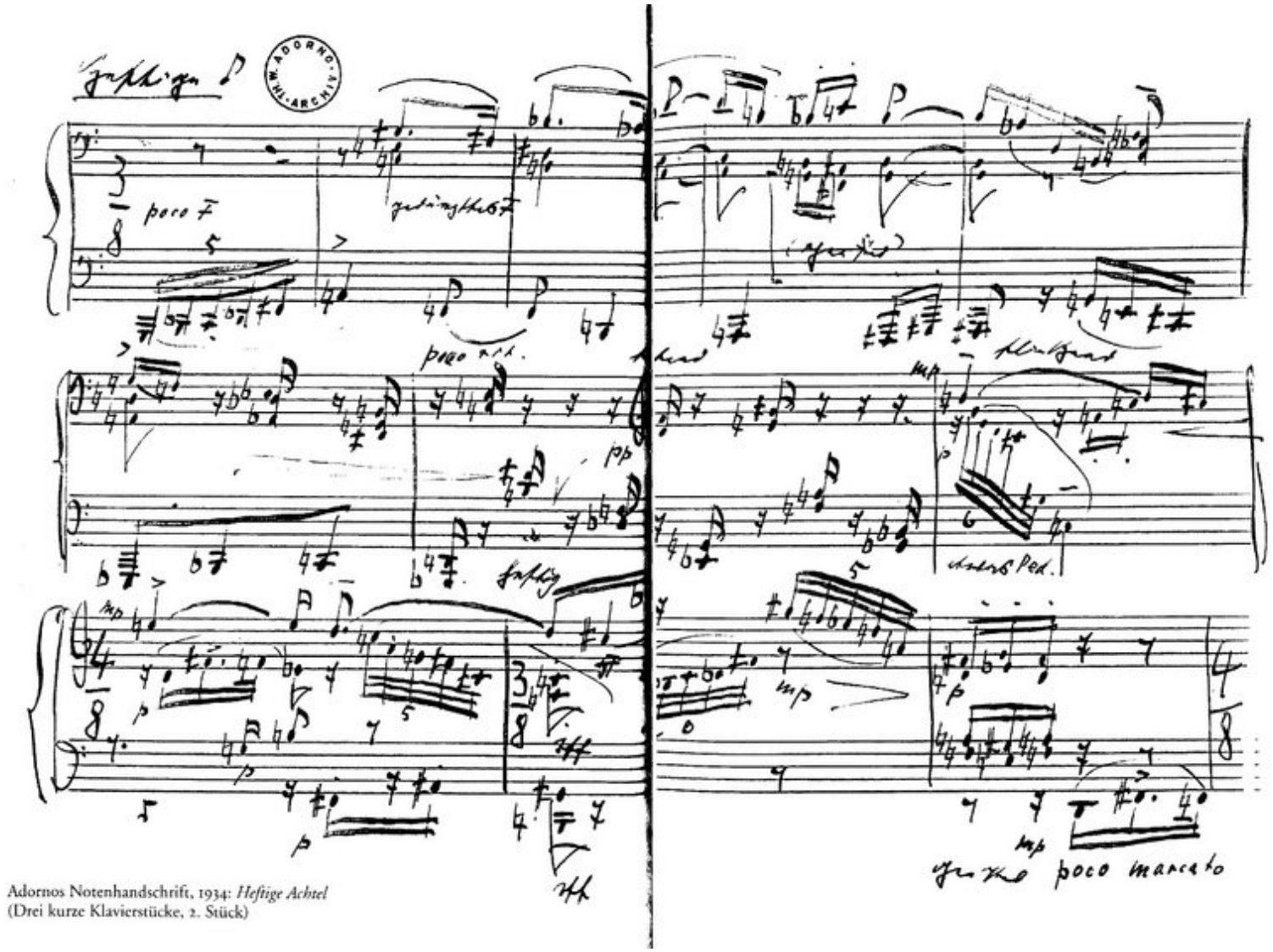
banal. That makes it quite difficult to decide to what extent one is dealing with irony here, or simply with a Tonio-Kröger kind of "ecstasy of mundanity".

One of the most peculiar compositions is the *P.K.B.-Suite* of 1933. Adorno spent the months after the start of the Nazi regime (which resulted in his venia legendi [teaching licence] being rescinded by the University of Frankfurt) in Berlin, giving Gretel Karplus, his later wife, some of those piano lessons he was already forbidden by law from giving to so-called Aryans.

For Gretel's introduction to the fundamentals of the piano he had written the "Kleine Kindersuite" – the P.K.B. in the title of which was in all likelihood an abbreviation from the private language of the lovers, standing probably for "Pferdekinder-Ballett" [Foals' Ballet]. The soi-disant program of the suite derives from this indecipherable idiom, is however also partly texted, so that it can be sung. That it deals, for all that, with eminently serious matters is attested by the "Kanon des Friedens" [peace canon] with which the suite ends. Whether seriousness or camouflage predominates in this piece, who's to say? Clearly in this suite one is not dealing with music for children, and equally clearly it is not much good as an introductory exercise to the art of piano-playing. It is reminiscent rather of what Adorno in another context often termed the "children's image" of music, with which he meant those notions of music which we carry with us from our childhood, and which tend to be "closer to the truth" than all the theories and practices of adult artists.

In this way the composer Adorno labours, in his piano pieces - as it were en passant -, at those problems and tasks which the theorist Adorno had made out to be central to the New Music as such. An example of this is for instance the remarkable brevity of all these pieces, many of which last for less than a minute while even the longest is just over five. It is to Schönberg's principled critique of illusion and appearance - the theoretic affirmation of which is what the *Philosophie der Neuen Musik* is all about - that Adorno's piano pieces, inter alia, seek to do justice. Their peculiar brevity may just, in the succession of Schönberg's and Webern's reductions, regain that density and consistency of form which traditional works - in their temporal inflation and under the weight of their ornamentalism and, in the end, indifference - may long since have lost. What it is that this brevity signifies is perhaps best indicated in Hölderlin's ode of the same name: "Why are you so short? [...]/did you not find in your youth/in the days of hope/singingly, never the end?/like my happiness is my song [...] and the

earth is cold/and the bird of the night/flaps uncomfortably before your eyes".




Adornos Notenhandschrift, 1934: *Heftige Achtel*
(Drei kurze Klavierstücke, 2. Stück)

Uncomfortably – on the occasion of a Webern piece Adorno uses the word shockingly – the soberingly abrupt end of such compositions confronts the listener with silence. Adorno quoted the above Hölderlin lines when he sought to give the moment of brevity - as it is to be found in the Expressionism of the Second Viennese School – a historical-philosophical interpretation: "such music, shortened to the blinking of an eye, is true as the manifestation of negative experience, the expression of objective suffering."[10] Negative experience, which for the philosopher of the *Negative Dialectics* culminates in that for which the name 'Auschwitz' stands, moved

10 *GS* 12, p. 41.

Adorno to formulate his dictum that writing a poem was barbaric. All of Adorno's compositions were written between 1920 and 1945. Shortly before his death in 1969, he spoke often of wanting to return to composition, just as soon as he was relieved of his duties as University lecturer and institute director. It never came to that, whether it was meant seriously or not. Metzger reports the following sentence from a conversation with Adorno: "One can hardly suppress a smile nowadays when one hears an opening bar."

They were not the worst of his readers and listeners, those who sought to explain Adorno's silence as composer after 1945 with his dictum on the impossibility of lyricism today, even if this explanation, as far as its factual aspect is concerned, may have been in error.

(transl. Frederik van Gelder)