Angelo Martingo
Minho University, Portugal
CEHUM – Centro de Estudos Humanísticos da Universidade do Minho
angelomartingo@elach.uminho.pt
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0915-7605

Carla Paiva
psicarlapaiva@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6946-1783

From the senses to reason, and back again: Adorno and Freud on interpretation

Between 1935 and 1959[1],Adorno wrote a series of essays and observations on music performance which werepublished in 2001 in Germanand later translated into Englishin 2006 by Polity Press under the title *Towards a theory of musical reproduction: Notes, a draft and two schemata*. This collection of fragmentary writings considerably widened the scope of previously published materialsto form a critical theory of performance that garnered significant scholarly attention[2].

---

[1] Henri Lonitz, "Editor's forward", in Theodor W. Adorno, *Towards a theory of musical reproduction*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, tr. by Wieland Hoban, Polity Press, Cambridge - Malden, 2006 (2001), p. xii–xiv.

[2] Examples include Ian Pace, "Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction by Theodor W. Adorno, Henri Lonitz and Wieland Hoban: Philosophy of New Music by Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Hullot-Hentor: Letters to his Parents by Theodor W. Adorno, Christoph Gödde, Wieland Hoban and Henri Lonitz", *Tempo* 2007 No 61 (242), p. 61–68; several authors in Mário Vieira de Carvalho (ed.), *Expression, truth, authenticity: On Adorno's theory of music and musical performance*, Colibri, Lisboa, 2009; Barbara Barry, "In Adorno's broken mirror: Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction", *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 2009 No 40 (1), p. 81–98; Ângelo Martingo & Carla Alexandra Paiva, "O sonho da interpretação: O sentido como reconstrução em Freud e Adorno", *Diacrítica* 2016 No 30 (2), p. 217–224; or Vinícius Benalia Penteado & Mário Videira, "Reprodução musical: um diálogo sobre interpretação musical em Schönberg, Kolisch e Adorno", *Revista Música* 2021 No 21 (2), p. 235–252. Conferences around Adorno's *Theory of Musical Reproduction* include *Expression, truth and authenticity: On Adorno's theory of music and musical reproduction*, held in Lisbon, CESEM – FCSH, in 28–29 November 2003, organised by Mário Vieira de Carvalho, Manuela Toscano, Paula Gomes Ribeiro, and José Júlio Lopes, and *Musik, Schrift, Differenz: Eine interdisziplinäre Lektüre von Adornos Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion*, organised by Matteo Nanni, Nikolaus Urbanek, and Julia Zupancic and held on 3–5 April 2019, at Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien.

Similarly, to his aesthetics and social theory, in relation to which Vieira de Carvalho[3] argues music theory is seminal,, Adorno critically elaborates on music performance as a play of dialectical elements[4]. Drawing on prior reflections[5], we intend to explore the relationship between two of these elements – the mimetic and the rational domains – stressing at the same time the structural similarity between this perspective and Freud's description of psychoanalytic interpretation, in which direction Adorno[6] apparently seems to point.

From senses to reason

In a frequently cited paradoxical passage[7], Adorno puts forward a singular understanding of musical interpretation as a copy or imitation of a "non-existent original"[8]. The undeterminable nature of a musical work follows from the non-identity between the musical work and the notated text. This is the case,Adorno contends, for a number of reasons.Notably, unlike visual art or linguistic texts, the musical sign is non-intentional[9]. Adornorefers to notation as "a memorial trace of the ephemeral sound, not as a fixing of its lasting meaning"[10], and thus an indeterminate representation ofthe musical gesture. Additionally, as is stressed by Vieira de Carvalho[11], idiomatic elements such as shared performance conventions at the time of the composition are, according to Adorno, absent from the text,testifying to the historicity of the musical text and to its being deciphered within tradition.

Besides its underdetermined character, notation presents a nature which is distinct from musical practice – a rationalisation of living memory whereby mimetic, expressive, practices are sacrificed on behalf of an acquired autonomy for music. In contexts where music is made in the

---

[3] Mário Vieira de Carvalho, "Introduction", in: *Expression, truth, authenticity. On Adorno's theory of music and musical performance*, ed. by. Mário Vieira de Carvalho, Colibri, Lisboa, 2009, p. 13; Mário Vieira de Carvalho, "Hope for Truth: Adorno's Concepts of Art and Social Theory in a Comparative Approach", *Constelaciones – Revista de Teoria Crítica* 2020 No 11, p. 100–116.

[4] Cf. Mário Vieira de Carvalho, "Meaning, mimesis, Idiom: On Adorno's theory of musical performance. Expression, truth and authenticity", in:*Expression, truth, authenticity. On Adorno's theory of music and musical performance* , ed. by M. Vieira de Carvalho, Colibri, Lisboa 2009, p. 83–94; B. Barry, op. cit., p. 81–98.

[5] A. Martingo & C. A. Paiva, op. cit., p. 217–224.

[6] Th. Adorno, op. cit., p. 81.

[7] M. Vieira de Carvalho, op. cit., p. 89; B. Barry, op. cit., p. 83; Sonja Dierks, "Musical writing and performance – about Adorno's theory of musical performance", in: *Expression, truth, authenticity. On Adorno's theory of music and musical performance*, ed. by Mário Vieira de Carvalho, Colibri, Lisboa 2009, p. 78; A. Martingo & C. A. Paiva, op. cit., p. 220ss; V. B. Penteado & M. Videira, op. cited., p. 248.

[8] Th. Adorno, op. cit., p. 183, 218.

[9] Ibidem., p. 4, 89, 167–168, 178, 181–182, 186, 188, 206.

[10]Ibidem, p. 4.

[11] M. Vieira de Carvalho, "Meaning, mimesis, idiom…", op. cit., p. 91ss.

absence of notation, Adorno writes, "memory proves strong"[12], arguing, for example, that the rhythmic complexity of certain music in traditional cultures is only matched by specialists in our own culture. Alienating living memory, notation acts, according to Adorno, as a disciplining apparatus of musical practices[13], and is singled out as "the central aspect of musical rationalization"[14]. By means of a process which, according to Adorno, is synonymous with controllability[15], notation transforms into spatial form something which is of a temporal nature and, when fixed in that way, the musical material can be manipulated and organised[16], or, as he also puts it: "the gestures which music either stimulates or itself imitates become controllable as images within it, to be made and brought forth once more as desired"[17]. In a passage duly highlighted by Vieira de Carvalho[18], Adorno understands this as a step towards the social alienation of memory[19]. Thus, at the same time that Adorno acknowledges the contribution of notation to the autonomy of the music, he points out that it represents a weakening of memory, insofar as only what has been forgotten in experience needs to be notated[20]. Following the same line of thought, Kaden[21] suggests that, in a historical overview, notation accompanies a progressive reduction of freedom in musical practice. Such is the case with the transition from an oral tradition to the fixation of pitch and rhythm, and the progressive complexity of notation in the Baroque era, during which such practices as improvisation were gradually eradicated. The specialisation of the musicians themselves, in which creativity is assigned to the composer, and reproduction to the performer, replicates this logic, according to Kaden[22].

Notwithstanding the distinction that must be made between the mimetic nature of the musical impulse and the rational character of notation, such elements interweave a dialectical relationship, and should be equated as two sides of the same coin – as Adorno puts it: "Rationalization, the condition for all autonomous art, is at once its enemy"[23].

---

[12] Th. Adorno, op. cited., p. 52, 171.

[13] Ibidem, p. 171.

[14] Ibidem, p. 140.

[15] Ibidem, p. 173.

[16] Ibidem.

[17] Ibidem.

[18] M. Vieira de Carvalho, "Meaning, mimesis, idiom...", op. cit., p. 84ff.

[19] Th. Adorno, op. cit., p. 172.

[20] Ibidem, p. 52–53.

[21] Christian Kaden, "Music sociology: Perspectives, horizons", in: *Musicology and sister disciplines: Past, present, future*, ed. by David Greer, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 275ff.

[22] Ibidem, p. 277–278.

[23] Th. Adorno, op. cit., p. 53.

From what has been shown above, we would stress that, according to Adorno, the path to notation is a process of rational elaboration concurring in the autonomy of music to the detriment of memory and mimetic elements. The path from notation to performance, which we should now address, proceeds in the opposite direction, namely, from rationality to mimesis, although, once again, mediated by analysis.

Back again

As was shown above, notation is an underdeterminate representation of a musical work – there is, according to Adorno a "zone of indeterminacy"[24] in the text. Notwithstanding such indeterminacy, the text constitutes a platform for constructing meaning and it is in this sense that Adorno suggests that "Every musical text is both things at once: a fundamentally insoluble riddle and the principle for its solution"[25].

Interpretation is played out on the basis of this double character of notation[26] and requires analysis as an intermediate stage – a precondition[27] – of performance. Adorno, in any case, sets as the task of analysis that of going beyond the reduction of music to formal elements, acquiring a critical dimension[28], in order, as he suggests elsewhere "to become aware of a work as a *force-field* [*Kraftfeld*] organized around a *problem*"[29].

Musical performance, however, is distinct from analysis – it has a mimetic, expressive character[30], and, while departing from analysis it must surpass it, trying, according to Adorno, to capture what is represented in notation through "spontaneity" and "musicality"[31]. Taking the inverse path that had led us from the compositional gesture to the notated text, the interpreter must recover the original musical impulse that, as was shown above, cannot be subsumed in the

---

[24] Th. Adorno, op. cit., p. 181–182; 186–187; 215. Cf. Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 197ff; M. Vieira de Carvalho, "Meaning, mimesis, idiom...", op. cit., p. 84ff; S. Dierks, op. cit., p. 74ff; B. Barry, op. cit., p. 94; V.B. Penteado & M. Videira, op. cit., p. 248.

[25] Th. Adorno, op. cited., p. 182. Cf. M. Vieira de Carvalho, "Meaning, mimesis, idiom...", op. cit., p. 83ff; S. Dierks, op. cit., p. 74ff; B. Barry, op. cit., p. 94; V.B. Penteado & M. Videira, op. cit., p. 248.

[26] Th. Adorno, op. cit., p. 67–68.

[27] Theodor W. Adorno, "On the problem of musical analysis: introduced and translated by Max Paddison", *Music Analysis* 1982 No 1 (2), p. 173, 176–177; Th. Adorno, *Towards a theory...*, op. cit., p. 2, 95. Cf. S. Dierks, op. cit., p. 79; Angelo Martingo, "Da análise à performance: crítica e estudos empíricos em expressão e estrutura musical", in: *Percursos de investigação no século XXI para o ensino do instrumento musical*, ed. by Eduardo Lopes, Húmus, Vila Nova de Famalicão, 2019, p. 172ss.

[28] Th. Adorno, *Towards a theory...*, op. cit., p. 72; cf. Th. Adorno, "On the problem...", op. cit., p. 72, 176.

[29] Th. Adorno, "On the problem...", op. cit., p. 181. Cf. Th. Adorno, *Towards a theory...*, op. cit., p. 80–81, 231; A. Martingo, "Da análise à performance...", op. cit., p. 171ss; V.B. Penteado & M. Videira,, op. cit., p. 249.

[30] Th. Adorno, *Towards a theory...*, op. cit., p. 4, 118. Cf. S. Dierks, op. cit., p. 76ss; A. Martingo, "Da análise à performance...", op. cit., p. 172ss.

[31] Th. Adorno, *Towards a theory...*, op. cit., p. 81.

score. Sonja Dierks puts it very clearly: "By means of interpretation the work is back-transferred into the state it held before it became a musical text"[32]. Adorno admitted, in a rough formulation, that: "in order to achieve a true interpretation, one must first analyse, and then forget the analysis"[33].

From this it follows that performance exhibits a dialectical and disruptive relationship with the rationality of notation and analysis which we would consider symmetrical to the disruption that took us from the expressive impulse to the rational domain of notation.In other words, a rational moment articulates and interrupts two expressive moments in which musical creation and performance take shape – if, on the one hand, musical interpretation and the work it seeks to recover share a mimetic nature, on the other, it is in the rational nature of the noted text that the work emerges for the interpreter, and from where the interpreter must begin his or her attempt to recover the work.

From music to psychoanalysis

Such an understanding seems reminiscent of the psychoanalytic process described by Freud, as we have suggested elsewhere[34].Referring to the relationship between mimetic and rational elements, it is Adorno himself whopoints to the analogy, stating:

> the *danger* in my reproduction theory is not unlike that of psychoanalysis. True interpretation is neither the irrational-idiomatic (critique of the minstrel) nor the analytically pure kind, but rather that restoration of the mimetic element which passes through analysis[35].

In fact, Freud[36]states that the aim of psychoanalytic technique is to determine the unconscious dream content separately from, and in spite of, the manifest content displayed in speech. According to Freud, the unconscious contentthat emerges in dreams is the result of a distortion imposed by censorship though operations such as condensation and displacement. Given the

---

[32] S. Dierks, op. cit., p. 76.

[33] Th. Adorno, *Towards a theory...*, op. cit., p. 96. Cf. A. Martingo,."Da análise à performance...", op. cit., p. 72.

[34] A. Martingo & C. A. Paiva, op. cit., p. 217–224.

[35] Th. Adorno, *Towards a theory...*, op. cit., p. 81.

[36] Sigmund Freud, *The interpretation of dreams. The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, volumes IV/V, Hogarth Press, London, 1953 (1900); Sigmund Freud, "Recommendations for physicians on the psychoanalytic method of treatment", in: idem, *Collected Papers*, volume II, Hogarth Press, London, 1956a (1912), p. 323–333; idem, "Further recommendations in the technique of psychoanalysis: recollection, repetition and working through", in: idem, *Collected Papers*, volume II, Hogarth Press, Londres, 1956b (1914), p. 366–376.

distortion effected by dream work, the latent content is recoverable only through analysis. As Freud suggested in two papers on psychoanalytic technique, analytical interpretation is[37] directed towards identifying and making conscious repressed content by recognizing the patient's resistance,based on the 'evenly-hovering attention' approach and the patient's free association. The repressed content is therefore identified from, and in spite of, the patient's secondary elaboration narrative[38]. Thus, in light of the fact that unconscious content emerges only after a process of distortion, the analyst works in the absence of an original, constructing meaning from the analysis of a secondary elaboration.

To sum up the analogy between Adorno's theorising ofmusical reproduction and Freud's description of psychoanalytic interpretation and show it in practice – in the same manner as that employed in psychoanalysis, the interpreter has access to the rationalization of the expressive impulse, and must recover, departing from and going beyond the analysis, the creative gesture which notation represents in fragmentary form. In both cases, we can understand the process as a double negation – the structuring of indeterminable content within a rational structure, and their recovery in the deconstruction of the secondary elaboration.

References

Adorno Theodor Wiesengrund, "On the problem of musical analysis: introduced and translated by Max Paddison", *Music Analysis* 1982 No 1 (2), p. 169–187.

Adorno Theodor Wiesengrund, *Towards a theory of musical reproduction*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, tr. by Wieland Hoban, Polity Press, Cambridge – Malden 2006.

Barry Barbara R., "In Adorno's Broken Mirror: Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction", *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 2009 No 40 (1), p. 81–98.

Dierks Sonja, "Musical writing and performance – about Adorno's theory of musical performance", in: *Expression, truth, authenticity. On Adorno's theory of music and musical performance*, ed. by Mário Vieira de Carvalho, Colibri, Lisboa 2009, p. 83–94.

Freud Sigmund, *The interpretation of dreams. The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, volumes IV/V, Hogarth Press, London, 1953 (1900).

Freud Sigmund,"Recommendations for physicians on the psychoanalytic method of treatment", in: idem, *Collected Papers*, volume II, Hogarth Press, London, 1956 (1912), p. 323–333.

---

[37] Idem, "Recommendations ...", op. cit, p. 324ff; idem, "Further Recommendations...", op. cit, p. 366ff.
[38] Cf. A. Martingo & C. A. Paiva, op. cit., p. 218ff.

Freud Sigmund, "Further Recommendations in the technique of psychoanalysis: recollection, repetition and working through", in: idem, *Collected Papers*, volume II, Hogarth Press, London,1956 (1914), p. 366–376.

Kaden Christian, "Music sociology: Perspectives, horizons", in: *Musicology and sister disciplines:Past, present, future*, ed. by David Greer, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 273–285.

Nanni Matteo & Urbanek Nikolaus & Zupancic Julia (Orgs), *Musik, Schrift, Differenz: Eine interdisziplinäre Lektüre von Adornos Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion* [Conference], Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien, 3–5 April 2019.

Lonitz Henri, "Editor's forward", in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Towards a theory of musical reproduction*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, tr. by Wieland Hoban, Polity Press, Cambridge – Malden 2006 (2001), p. xi–xv.

Martingo Ângelo, "Melodia e imitação musical em *Ensaio sobre a origem das línguas*", *Diacrítica* 2012 No 26 (2), p. 369–381.

Martingo Ângelo, "Da análise à performance: crítica e estudos empíricos em expressão e estrutura musical", in: *Percursos de investigação no século XXI para o ensino do instrumento musical*, ed. by Eduardo Lopes, Húmus, Vila Nova de Famalicão, 2019, p. 171–180.

Martingo Ângelo & Paiva Carla Alexandra, "O sonho da interpretação – o sentido como reconstrução em Freud e Adorno", *Diacrítica* 2016 No 30 (2), p. 217–224.

Pace Ian, "Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction by Theodor W. Adorno, Henri Lonitz and Wieland Hoban: Philosophy of New Music by Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Hullot-Hentor: Letters to his Parents by Theodor W. Adorno, Christoph Gödde, Wieland Hoban and Henri Lonitz", *Tempo* 2007 No 61 (242), p. 61–68.

Paddison Max, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993.

PenteadoVinícius Benalia & Videira Mário, "Reprodução musical: um diálogo sobre interpretação musical em Schönberg, Kolisch e Adorno", *Revista Música* 2021 No 21 (2), p. 235–252.

Reemtsma Jan Philipp, "Afterword", in: Theodor Adorno, *Adorno dream notes*, ed. by Christoph Gödde and Henry Lonitz, trad. by Rodney Livingstone, Polity Press, Cambridge – Malden 2007, p. 79–107.

Vieira de Carvalho Mário, Toscano Manuela, Ribeiro Paula Gomes, and Lopes José Júlio (Orgs.), *Expression, Truth and Authenticity: On Adorno's Theory of Music and Musical Performance* [Conference], Lisbon, CESEM – FCSH, 28–29 de november 2003.

Vieira de Carvalho Mário (ed.), *Expression, truth, authenticity. On Adorno's theory of music and musical performance*, Colibri, Lisboa 2009.

Vieira de Carvalho Mário, "Introduction", in: *Expression, truth, authenticity. On Adorno's theory of music and musical performance*, ed. by Mário Vieira de Carvalho, Colibri, Lisboa 2009, p. 13-25.

Vieira de Carvalho Mário, "Meaning, mimesis, Idiom: On Adorno's theory of musical performance. Expression, truth and authenticity", in: *Expression, truth, authenticity. On Adorno's theory of music and musical performance*, ed. by M. Vieira de Carvalho, Colibri, Lisbon 2009, p. 83–94.

Vieira de Carvalho Mário, "Hope for Truth: Adorno's Concepts of Art and Social Theory in a Comparative Approach", *Constelaciones – Revista de Teoria Crítica*, 2020 No 11, p. 100–116.