

# Elias and/or Adorno – a short personal reflection and perspective from a musicologist

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*ABSTRACT: This article focus on the epistemological problems faced when writing a history of music in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It discusses the different ways in which Norbert Elias and Theodor W. Adorno understood the life and works of respectively Mozart and Beethoven. It is argued that, even though Adorno had a far greater knowledge of music, his Marxist inspired dialectical view on music's and art's position ends in a dead end, whereas Elias' more open theoretical perspectives gives the scholar an opportunity to understand interdependencies of man's use of music, the ongoing changes of music's structures, the changes of the mindsets of man, and the general different changes in the societies of the major countries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.*

*KEYWORDS: Epistemology, Adorno, Elias, History of music.*

## Introduction

Norbert Elias was the first scholar to receive the Theodor W. Adorno Prize from the city of Frankfurt am Main in 1977. Adorno was, in Norbert Elias's words, a humane Marxist. [1][#N1]. His reliance on Marx, writes Elias, brought with it disadvantages since it bound Adorno 'to a system of thought based on the range of experience and knowledge of an earlier epoch, which was only partially appropriate as guidance to the reality of his own time' (2009: 84). For Elias, that meant that even if Adorno posed the right questions, the readers of Adorno's writings never got the decisive answer. On the one hand, then, Elias suggested that Adorno's humane Marxism was a major reason for his 'ultimate indecision ... to form a theoretical synthesis that went beyond the Marxian one', but on the other hand Elias also found an answer in the trajectory of Adorno's life. Elias and Adorno shared many experiences as emigrant scholars.

Wolf Lepenies (1977: 31) spoke at the ceremony about Adorno's and Elias's shared fates, but also of their epistemological outlooks, which were both different and alike. Lepenies also quoted some sentences from Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's joint book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997 [1947]), [2][#N2], which he found in essence mirrored much of what Elias also stood for. Elias for his part referred more precisely to Adorno and Horkheimer's writings on culture and civilisation in *Aspects of Sociology* (1973 [1956]: 89–100). [3][#N3] Reading the chapter 'Culture and Civilisation' in this book, one indeed finds that Adorno et al. – every bit as much as Elias – had a deep knowledge of European cultural history: Cicero, Dante, Rousseau, Sigmund Freud among others, all contribute to Adorno's discussion. It ends, however, in a typically Adornian way as they talk about 'the chaotic and frightening aspect of the contemporary technological civilisation, [however, is that] ... it is not the rationalisation of the world which is to blame for the evil, but the irrationality of this rationalisation' (1973: 94). Elias, however, discussing the differences between this book and his own *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, published seventeen years earlier, explicitly states that Adorno had not moved on in his thinking:

He was not unaware that, in the course of an unplanned process, even the victorious Marxist could turn from oppressed into oppressors. But like so many others, he saw no way out of this dilemma. (1977: 89)

His Marxist framework hindered him from fully coming to terms with this longitudinal development.

My aim with this article will be to follow two different tracks (including some necessary minor deviations): On the one hand I will discuss what Adorno meant to me in the 1970s and onwards, and, on the other, show what my later readings and use of Elias's writings have meant. This means by necessity that I shall also compare their scholarly perspectives, and in conclusion show how I as epistemologically and musicologist–ethnomusicologist have used and intend to use Elias's multifaceted theories and writings.

At the time this prize ceremony took place, musicologists in Sweden were familiar with some of Adorno's writings on music, but few if any had read anything from Elias's pen. The Swedish translation of Adorno's *Sociology of Music – Twelve Theoretical Lectures* was the first book met by musicologists in my generation (born in the 1940s). It was widely read and encouraged many to look for other works by Adorno, which at the time meant books in German, in particular *Die Philosophie der Neuen Musik* (1949). Since most colleagues at my department at that time were permeated with an interest in Marxist cultural theories, while at the same time several of the postgraduate students were involved in the jazz/rock/pop scene, the studies of Adorno on the one hand aroused our curiosity due to his style and method, while, on the other hand, we questioned his reasons for rejecting *our* kind of youth music. To most or perhaps all of us, there was, a considerable discrepancy between Adorno's thoughts and our own experiences of popular music. [4],[#N4]

A second wave of Adorno's writings reached musicology in the beginning of the 1990s. Paradoxically enough, the impact from this wave was probably more difficult to notice than the first since it was broader and covered a wider scientific area than just musicology. Furthermore, there was also an increasing interest in contemporary cultural theories altogether, which was largely due to the spread of the 'subject' Cultural Studies. [5],[#N5]. Several musicologists such as Rose Rosengard Subotnik (1991), who worked outside of this circle of popular music researchers, also often referred to Adorno in their work.

Apart from the fact that writers on popular music as a rule questioned Adorno's views on popular music, [6],[#N6] we also noticed critical voices among sociologists, among them, Peter Martin's influential book (1995) which contains a lengthy discussion of Adorno.

I shall return to Adorno's perspectives when comparing their usefulness with that of Norbert Elias's work, but let me first mention the first of Elias's books I encountered, *Involvement and Detachment* (2007 [1987]). I just found it in a bookshop in London in the late 1980s, ten years after the first Adorno wave. It had nothing to do with my project at the time, to write an ethnomusicological study on popular music, *schlager* (foxtrot, waltzes etc), the new form of folk music from the 1920s in Sweden. [7],[#N7]

Now, some twenty years later, it is of course difficult to remember exactly what I found so fascinating with Elias's take on Edgar Allen Poe's story of 'The Fishermen in the Maelstrom' (2007: 105–78). As I now browse through the book, I find I've scribbled many comments in the margin of the book. One of these that I had underlined read: 'In short, the inability to control tends to go hand in hand with high emotivity of response, which keeps the chance of controlling the dangers of the process at low level, which keeps at a high level the emotivity of response, and so forth.' (p. 112) The comment I had written was 'Rock ⇌ Brahms' – by which I probably implied that rock, to its practitioners and audience at a concert, meant a higher level of emotivity and less distance, in contrast to those who played or listened intensely to music by Brahms, which involved less emotivity, but also a different way of listening. [8],[#N8]. Different use of music – different needs.

I knew this was a different kind of book, and it led me to read the two volumes of *The Civilizing Process*. Here I met the concept of ‘figuration’, and was struck and delighted by the musical dance metaphor Elias had chosen. The beginning was quite unexpected: ‘One should think of a mazurka, a minuet, a polonaise, a tango, or rock’n’roll ... mobile figurations of interdependent people on the dance floor ... like every other figuration, social figuration, a dance figuration is relatively independent of the specific individual.’ [9],[#N9]

It was evident to me that these books in a general way suited my conception of how cultures changed – or, maybe, just that cultures changed. The reason for this was quite simple: the thesis I had written in the 1970s was an historical *and* ethnomusicological study on the culture and special singing tradition (*yoik*) of the Saami in northern Scandinavia. My readings in social anthropology and ethnomusicology had simply made me susceptible to Elias’s theories. The Saami social–cultural system had been, and to a certain extent still was, different from their neighbouring peoples, and a long process of acculturation had influenced the Saami beliefs and ways of living in both planned and unplanned directions. ‘Continuity and change’ was a catchphrase within social anthropology at the time.

Some years later I found that my interest in Elias was shared by Paul Nixon, who at the time was presenting his dissertation in my department (Nixon, 1994). The single most important book for me in the 1980s was undoubtedly Stephen Mennell’s introduction to Elias’s scholarly world (1989) [10],[#N10] followed by a steady output of Elias’s own books.

It is unknown to me, however, whether many musicologists in the 1980s were inspired by the publication of Elias’s books. A search today in the major musicological database, *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature*, is not that encouraging. ‘Norbert Elias’ yielded just 10 hits, and ‘Elias, Norbert’ 19 hits. In the last case, ten hits were reviews on Elias’s book on Mozart (2010 [1991]). There are thus very few documented studies containing the word Elias in the *abstracts*, which doesn’t necessarily mean that there are no other musicological studies where the author engages with Elias’s thoughts. There is, however, no easy way to find these possible books and articles. [11],[#N11]

One of the earliest studies that is included in the list by RILM is my essay ‘Fr-a-g-me-n-ts: A discussion on the position of critical ethnomusicology in contemporary musicology’, written in the mid-1990s. At that time musicology was heavily influenced by the American so-called ‘New Musicology’, and by French sociologists and philosophers. My essay was at bottom a defence against my own – and my department’s – relative lack of interest in this French post-structural tradition, as well as a sceptical attitude to New Musicology (Edström, 1997: 22–8).

The closing part of my essay had the headline ‘Norbert Elias – all’s well that ends well’. Even if many musicologists at the time must have noted Elias’s book on Mozart (see below), I realised that probably few were familiar with Elias’s larger *oeuvre*. I thus introduced Elias as an historically orientated sociologist who attached great importance to combining empirical knowledge from different fields, and felt that his scientific approach was as valid for social scientists as for humanists (1997: 59–62). I noted that for Elias the individual was always inseparable from society, just as our language, our knowledge and our consciousness are all intimately connected in the societal process. These processes, just like processes in nature, were blind and unpredictable. I thus found Elias’s writings very inspirational. [12],[#N12]

## Elias and Adorno on Mozart

As a musicologist I *had* obviously to read Elias’s book on Mozart. [13],[#N13] I read it in 1991, but the book was, to my surprise, also translated into Swedish (among several other languages), as early as 1992. In contrast to the

later English translation, the emphasis on ‘sociology’ was kept in the Swedish title. [14],[#N14]

I felt at that time very much at home with Elias’s epistemology, but I remember that the reception of this book among sociologists and musicologists in the coming years was both varied and easy to understand. Elias’s main aim was to understand Mozart’s predicaments, his place and role from his contemporary social-psychological situation. The reactions from the reviewers, were, as mentioned, varied. I thought that one reviewer, Andrew Steptoe (1994), *was* rather representative for the historical musicologists at the time. Looking up this review again, I notice that he rightly concluded that the study was ‘a contribution to the sociology of art ... that Elias saw Mozart as an exemplar of the transformation from craftsman’s art to artists’ art.’ Steptoe, however, also felt Elias ‘had a dangerously romantic view of the composer’, but he found that ‘the account of Mozart’s break with Salzburg [was] particularly effective.’ [15],[#N15] Steptoe also mentioned, correctly, that Elias had not followed up musicological research on Mozart by Robbins Landon and others. Since Steptoe was aware of the background history to Elias’s book, this was, if a correct remark, also an easy one to make. Elias started out with this project in the late 1970s, but did not proceed with it for many years. Elias’s project was unfinished and the timing not the best – even if all the publishers of the book in 1991–3 might have thought that the publication would stand out in the market. [16],[#N16]

Adorno never wrote a book on Mozart, but Mozart appears now and then in Adorno’s writings. His interests were different from Elias’s, since one of Adorno’s primary interests was the work of music as a sedimented example of the historical and social situations, contradictions and disillusionings of the *art object itself*. Discussing naivety in art, Adorno, for instance writes:

Even Mozart, who played the role of the divinely gifted, capering prodigy in the bourgeois household, was – as every page of his correspondence with his father documents – incomparably more reflexive than the popular profile of him lets on; reflexive, however, not in the sense of a freely abstract hovering intelligence, but in the compositional material itself.  
(1997: 33)

Another difference was that Adorno, in contrast to Elias, was much more interested in studying the *concepts* of experience in history than the actual use of music (see below).

At the end of the 1990s I took part in a conference on aesthetics where I met several distinguished aestheticians and philosophers. I felt – epistemically – rather lonely at the conference, since my paper was on aesthetics as primarily a social process rather than as a trans-cultural and ahistorical phenomenon. My suspicion that philosophers often talked about Plato and Adorno in the same sentence, conflating time and different mind-sets into one was confirmed. [17],[#N17] I tried to use *aesthetic* as key to my understanding of how and why the use of music had changed from the Greeks up to today. In my later book, I presented my task as finding information about:

[w]here/when/how/and with whom, song and music was played and listened to. To do this, one must examine the following factors: a) the social context, b) the references of individuals in groups, c) the music and d) the presentation of music in an intimate ensemble. These four create the framework for the use and reception of music, as well as its roll, function, and meaning. Any narrative about aesthetics should be placed within this thought matrix. (Edström 2008: 20)

One chapter in this book deals with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The latter is particularly a hothouse of social-cultural-historical developments that changed the ways music were used and understood

among small strata of people in central Europe. Already, in 1735 the philosopher Alexander Baumgarten had thus appropriated the term *aisthesis* and wrote that:

*[t]hings known* are to be known by the superior faculty...; *things perceived* are to be known by the inferior faculty, as the object of the science of perception, or *aesthetic*. (1954 [1735]: 78 /1735 § 116)

It was thus in this context I found much of use in Elias's book on court society (2006 [1969]). To Elias, it was important, among others things, to show that the court society created a personality type that had to manoeuvre completely in public, but whose behaviour was at the same time very carefully regulated. The refined taste of the courtiers had a demarcating function downwards. Elias describes how prestige became fetishised:

The fetish character of every act in the etiquette was clearly developed at the time of Louis XIV [...] Etiquette and ceremony increasingly became ... a ghostly *perpetuum mobile* that continued to operate regardless of any direct use-value. (2006: 95)

That meant that the courtiers viewed external objects differently from how the bourgeoisie came to do in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Things in and of themselves, for example courtly *art and music*, meant less objectively than what they connoted in relationship to the never-ending power drama. As Elias wrote: 'While we like to objectify or reify everything personal, court people personify the objective' (2006: 110). Elias saw a parallel between the features of the French court and artistic sensibilities that became standardised under the *ancien régime*. Although he did not mention music specifically, his outlook and discussion clearly show the value of applying a sociological perspective to art. [\[18\].\[#N18\]](#)

I tried thus in my book (2008 [2002]) to give an overview of how the structure of music and its role and function in the court society could be understood. Since art was a part of etiquette, Baroque compositions, too, were a part of the social game. No courtier should needlessly be surprised by completely unexpected musical structures. The social game demanded that one was not adversely affected by completely unexpected musical structures, but rather that compositions had a calm balance and moderation. Everything was predefined, even the affect of musical compositions. Composers, as a rule, wrote for the glory of the most high on earth and in heaven.

Again, grounding my perspective in Elias's analyses, I emphasised that the bourgeoisie was also exposed to as many constraints as the members of court. The bourgeoisie were formed above all by their professions. But the demands and strains that were part of professional life for the bourgeoisie were different. Leisure could be seen as a free zone in which a meaningful part of the musical aesthetic project could be developed. The bourgeoisie, who principally lived in both the professional and the private worlds, found themselves – and especially at the many German courts – in the shadow of a noble hegemony, which at the same time blocked their ambitions to change their future prospects. This process carried on for many generations, and the outcome depended upon how one engaged and accepted the noble values of the time, as well as on how different rational and thought processes affected the bourgeoisie in their professional lives (2006: 72n46).

I thus showed, in a similar overview, how the structural changes in music could be understood as the process of psychogenesis and sociogenesis continuing in the eighteenth century. We find many different musical styles that in their way mirror the dynamic societal processes in the century.

D'Alembert wrote in an introductory text to the great *Encyclopédie* in 1751 that of all the arts, music had made the greatest advances in recent years. A few decades later, a bearer of the latest style of music and a young piano virtuoso, Ludwig van Beethoven, entered the musical city of Vienna in 1792, a fact that, in a roundabout way, takes us back to Theodor W. Adorno.

Horkheimer and Adorno clearly had not changed their basic outlooks when a new edition of *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* was published with a new preface in 1969. [19],[#N19] Although Elias was in sympathy with their feelings (their basic 'triple' idea was that human beings' increasing self-control has been accomplished through a control of nature followed by a control of society), he differed in that his epistemological base and longitudinal view on the history of humans seems, to a greater extent than his contemporary colleagues, to have made it possible to form a new synthesis *on the way to another*, as new interdependencies and societal factors presented themselves. Elias meant that he saw syntheses as a more open-ended task than Adorno, who analysed dialectical processes linked together in a complicated manner (see below). The prerequisite for Elias's method arguably suggests a higher degree of detachment than Adorno's.

I sometimes even get the feeling, though it is hard to pinpoint by showing actual paragraphs in Adorno's writings, that he believed the promises formulated by a collective of writers in the Enlightenment to be more than an expectation, indeed a stage that he hoped or knew would eventually happen. This is not unheard of (in Marx, for one). The problem looking back on history is as always the simple fact that we know – in this case – the answers already given in the nineteenth century to these promises. But whatever the expectations or promises, and however they are pronounced, no one can later be found fully accountable for the unplanned directions that history took. The utopian hope that Adorno expressed meant, as Richard Leppert writes in his fine introductions to Adorno's essays on music, 'that modernity and catastrophe were one, the bitter irony of which resided in the fact that modernity at its beginning has posited something fundamentally different, which might have been realised but was not' (2002: 514).

It seems almost as if Reason, in real life propagated by philosophers among others, was experiencing regret even from the time of early Greek civilisation and especially from the time of the Enlightenment, and in a spirit of dialecticism gave up on itself in disappointment over humanity's handling of the experiment. I cannot help thinking now and then that Adorno's 'utopian delusion' sometimes made him doomed to life within the prison of his own thoughts. Poetry *was* written after Auschwitz, as Adorno knew – and as Elias did.

Elias's theory of civilisation, as Hermann Korte (2001: 31) commented, leaves us with a chance, whereas: 'Simmel lamented the "tragedy of culture" ... Weber saw ... society as trapped in a "steel cage", and ... Horkheimer and Adorno found their words overtaken by the Holocaust.' As Elias thought back on his life and his writings, he said that what 'I have tried to elaborate are neither Marxian nor liberal, neither socialist nor conservative ... undoubtedly [this is] one of the reasons for the difficult reception this [Elias's] theory, and the books in which it is contained, have had. (1994: 31).

After Adorno returned to Germany he published many studies on the sociology of music and aesthetics. As I wrote the chapter on the eighteenth century in my book (2008: 109–22), it was also natural to engage in Adorno's writings on Beethoven. Rolf Tiedemann, in the preface of his edition of Adorno's book on Beethoven, writes that Adorno started to write on Beethoven in the 1930s and that only some parts of these writings were published during Adorno's life (Adorno 1993). In this collection of writings, we first encounter some memories from Adorno's childhood, how as a pre-teenager he listened to and tried to play Beethoven. He continued to listen to, play and study Beethoven as he grew up. For the teenager Adorno, it was as natural to listen to Beethoven as it was to study Kant. [20],[#N20]

The fact, however, that music primarily is a syntactic system, with little semantic content – though it is a contextualised object played, composed and listened to by humans in history – amounts to an almost invincible problem when one confronts the task of understanding what instrumental music means or what, if at all, it communicates. Just emotions or also propositions?

The long discursive Western tradition has framed the possibilities for what have been believed or taken for granted, so that, as we are socialised into Western society, we will find it natural that the minor third somehow *sounds* sad. But to what extent music can communicate any kind of semantic information is a more contested problem. These problems of the interpretation of a sounding structure, however, were as a rule *not* of special interest to Adorno. To him, the import of Beethoven's musical compositions mirrored the general societal developments that took place during Beethoven's life. Adorno thus took his departure from the idea that art's relationship to society was one to one, and that already in later eighteenth century music had more and more become a commodity. Music as an artefact was a part of the same working process in society in modernity.

Adorno focused on the stylistic changes that traditionally have led musicologists to talk about Beethoven's middle and late period. Here is not the place to describe how Adorno does this, except to say that his suggestions about musical structures – not least concerning the implications or 'meanings' of musical structures – are sweeping and inexact (this is a standard musicological complaint about Adorno's working method). [\[21\]](#)[\[#N21\]](#) Briefly, it can be said that he offered many comments on *general* structural differences between the two 'styles' of Beethoven and tried to show analogous societal developments. While the music of Beethoven's middle period showed that the bourgeoisie's place in society – their hope for personal freedom within a society imposing collective constraints on its citizens – had a meaning and was possible, this possibility was later denied them. The balance between personal freedom and social constraints had begun to tip into an unplanned and false direction. The promises of the Enlightenment were felt to slip away; no reconciliation was possible. Beethoven's *music* had to change since it was no longer possible to write authentic music of the middle period kind. In order to keep its *truth content*, known only through philosophical reflection, music had to become autonomous and an aesthetic art, thus criticising society. Music felt this, and moreover, as Adorno said in the last sentence in his third fragment on Beethoven's late style: 'In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes' (2002: 567). [\[22\]](#)[\[#N22\]](#)

## From Mozart to Beethoven

In contrast to Adorno, Tia DeNora in her book on Beethoven (1995) seeks to understand the social circumstances in which Beethoven lived and worked in Vienna from the 1790s. As this sociological book in many ways comes close to an Eliasian understanding of culture, it will here serve as an antidote to Adorno. In order to understand how Beethoven's artistic status was constructed, DeNora first directs her interest to the culture of concerts. She points out that whereas easily digested pieces had earlier been favoured by the nobility and bourgeoisie, longer instrumental concerts and symphonies were now being performed more often. She finds that Beethoven was a key figure in this transformation. [\[23\]](#)[\[#N23\]](#) In spite of what is often taken for granted, and this seems to be Adorno's point of departure, DeNora shows that it was the nobility rather than the bourgeoisie that took the late style to their hearts. From an analysis of the social status of the audiences that attended and supported concerts with more demanding programmes (music also from the late period), she shows that by openly supporting the dynamic Beethoven, the prominent nobility could more easily secure their leading position in music culture:

This view runs counter to what Arnold Hauser (1962), Henry Raynor (1976), Theodor Adorno (1976), and a host of other scholars have said, on the basis of scant evidence, about the origins of serious music ideology. (DeNora 1995: 36)

As DeNora shows, we cannot isolate one factor, such as for example matters of status or taste, or another that Beethoven *had* to change his music. It is known that the common audience in the first decades of the nineteenth century found Beethoven's music different. Beethoven played, improvised and composed in a manner that was clearly considered to deviate from common contemporary familiar styles. Nor was it the case that the nobility, from a music stylistic point of view, really *wanted* to go along with the stylistic development of Beethoven's music. It was rather a combination of concurrent factors that in the end functioned as a catalyst to this unplanned process. As the process went on – Beethoven died in 1828 – the nobility could thus keep their position as the giver of taste in the ongoing power balance between the nobility and the bourgeoisie.

DeNora, then, clearly shows the difficulties one encounters when using an abstract explanation model to extract imagined abstract relations between structures in music and society. Thus her suggestions undermine the hypotheses of Adorno that Beethoven's music was balancing between the extreme poles of freedom and force, as well as the ultimate reasons Adorno gave for why the music changed.

However, if read positively (as I have tried to do), one could perhaps imagine a synthesis between the different views implying that the nobility's actions (ongoing feudal force) were outweighed by the presence of the bourgeois audience (which had recently found freedom). In any case, Beethoven's music was not appreciated within wider groups of the bourgeoisie until well after his death. [24],[#N24]

DeNora's perspective and method is, as my short overview shows, thus quite different from Adorno's. She does not analyse the music as such. Adorno often did, but either on such a general level that nothing really new was added, or in such an idiosyncratic way – mirroring his own way of listening – that it is difficult to know what to do with the comments. [25],[#N25] The reader is thus expected to accept that Adorno's music analyses exist but are not shown in any detail; or, as another writer on Adorno, Carl Dahlhaus (1983: 29) has commented, Adorno's analyses seem to exist on a semi-abstract plane. But one cannot, of course, doubt his enormous and detailed knowledge of music's structure and his competence as a listener. [26],[#N26]

In a comment on the different aims of Adorno's and DeNora's writings on Beethoven, Richard Leppert (in Adorno 2002: 513) says that Adorno's concern was 'the discursive implications of Beethoven's music,' whereas DeNora writes about patronage. The overall problem to me, however, is that Adorno does not grapple with the *use* of music at the time from an ethnological–empirical perspective. [27],[#N27] As DeNora puts it in her book on Adorno, his over-theoretical approach indirectly shows what is not there, 'sociologically and phenomenologically, through too strict adherence to "the facts" of music history.' She adds that what is needed 'is a greater attention to the detailed practice of composing, distributing, and consuming music, and ... the social construction of musical worth.' [28],[#N28]

The change of style of Beethoven's music is but one case, one of many cogs in Adorno's total dialectical system that is full of dichotomies and antinomies. Indeed, even those who first meet Adorno's philosophy by reading standard dictionary articles will notice that the authors often start with a series of dialectical concepts. [29],[#N29] And as any reader of Adorno knows, in books such as *Minima Moralia* (1978) or *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), it is almost always possible to find at least one sentence on every page that somehow seems to bite itself in its own tail. [30],[#N30]



Notwithstanding the fact that Adorno's style of writing is supposed to do the same work as his dichotomies, to strive for a new insight, a hope that *seems* to point to a promising insight, as soon as an insight is felt to glimmer within the thought itself, the semantic content implodes in a dialectical twist. Adorno thus seems to have covered all aspects of reality by developing a long chain of concepts, which, in an infinite dialectical regression, are interdependent and interact with one another. [31][#N31] It is as if our lives are either just going downhill in an eternal slalom race, or cross-country in a circle, possibly hoping to connect to the new point of arrival, only to find that any point of arrival has been moved to a different track at the horizon. Dialectical explanations can hardly be an eternal and all-encompassing descriptive system for the intricate network of relationships that affect society's blind process of development. Adorno's dialectical web, woven with his über-virtuosic use of language, expands until it covers an endless and impenetrable landscape. And, it might also be said, Adorno forgot his role as sociologist and followed a long trail of philosophers from Plato onwards that started and ended in their *own* profession. Does music in the last resource have been explained from a philosophical point of view? – that is, as Adorno put it: 'That music can say just what is its own, that means that words and concepts are not in a position to immediately express its content but can facilitate it, that is as philosophy' (1993: 31).

One problem that Max Paddison (1993: 108–48) discusses at great length is that Adorno also never satisfactorily succeeded in explaining *mediation*, how the process of interaction between music and society actually worked. [32][#N32] Again, then, we find the same baffling problem: how to explain in writing how the mediation between music and society (including human beings!) works when music is, to start with, a very weak representational or semantic system of communication?

In the field of musicology Giles Hooper (2006) – following a trail that Peter Martin (1995), among others, has trod – has recently offered a penetrating illumination of Adorno's discourse on mediation. Although Adorno argued that pure thought does not exist, since thinking and believing are socio-historical forms of man's activities, he still – as a sociologist concerned with mediation and value judgments – held very personal and strong beliefs or values. Adorno's enthusiasm for Schoenberg's music, and vice versa, his analyses of the hidden meanings in Stravinsky's music are well known. [33][#N33]

The problem of explicit value judgments seems to be an ever-present problem for most writers on the sociology of the arts. I try, but do not always succeed, to stick to Max Weber's *idea* of value neutrality, and contain or bracket out my own value judgments. But as already mentioned, Adorno – in contrast to Elias – did not as a rule attempt to 'steer between the Scylla of sociological relativism and philosophical absolutism' (2009: 29). As Hooper compares Martin's and Adorno's contrasting views, he also finds that for Martin value judgments represent raw data with which to start his sociological investigation, while for Adorno, 'such material is an already mediated subject-matter requiring historical and philosophical interpretation in order to reveal its negative moment of truth' (2006: 108).

The interpretation of Adorno's *oeuvre* goes on with undiminished vigour. One of the most recent contributions I have come across signals its basic position even in its title, *The Dialectical Counter-Enlightenment* (Thorne, 2009: 15–17, 310–24); if we follow the history of anti-foundationalism in a philosophical manner, we find in the end that it cannot be defended. The message in the book is that the nihilism of Adorno's project cannot be saved; we must find another way to use reason and knowledge – however it is defined in a postmodern world, as a commodity in itself among many others – as a means, in the spirit of a dialectical Counter-Enlightenment, of unwrapping the knot.

As I see it, the method of cutting an enigma or a ('dialectical?') problem with a double-edged sword, was always too easy a way, and spoiled the possibility of unwrapping it. It might be a political trick, but not an academic one.

I am at present drilling deeper into the eighteenth century. I want, in short, to study the changes in the role, function and meaning of music in relation to the interrelated changes of sociogenesis and psychogenesis in the eighteenth century. I have thus once more returned to Elias's writings. The period of time that is of special interest to me goes from *ca.* 1720–70, in terms of musical style from high-baroque, *galant* music, *Empfindsamkeit*, *Sturm und Drang*, to Viennese Classicism. This period of time has traditionally been of relatively little interest to musicologists. The combined shadows of J. S. Bach and W. A. Mozart have meant that the time and the composers in between have been regarded as less important.

It will thus be necessary to think about the refined taste of the nobleman, the *galant homme*. It was a taste that had a demarcating function from the top downwards. One is therefore reminded of an analogous comment by the music theoretician and composer Johann Mattheson, who in 1739 wrote, concerning the leading melody, that 'the others (harmony and rhythm) conduct themselves in relation to melody, as in a monarchy' (1999 [1739]: 157).

Since I am interested in the interrelated changes between human beings, music and society, a grounded knowledge of the societal changes is of utmost importance. As Elias has commented, in France the change, 'from the "baroque" to the "rococo", from the "Louis Quatorze" to the "Regency" [1715–23] style, is a change within the framework of the same social stratum' (2006: 85-6). But, even if the change that Elias mentions here was an intra-cultural change, it affected the bourgeoisie, and meant, especially in Germany, that more and more men and women were influenced by enlightened ideas – but also discovered the irrationality of the world, contributing to the founding of movements such as Pietism on the one hand, and on the other hand to 'taste' for the intelligentsia. The initial and cautious scientific and rational way of understanding the world paradoxically also fostered its accepted opposite, a different kind of sensuality. To my mind, then, the importance of this process from a musicological point of view has not been fully explained in an Eliasian manner. The process clearly took place at different speeds in different places. As Elias has showed, it was much easier for the French bourgeoisie to rise within the centralised French kingdom. The German situation was quite different, partly the result of an abundance of smaller duchies, heavily influenced by French culture and Italian music. The division between nobility and the bourgeoisie was especially sharp in Germany. It fostered an inward movement through which the bourgeoisie, as we put it today, 'had to find themselves'. For the Germans, literature, poetry, and music were arguably even more rewarding and valuable compensations for the lack of political influence than for the bourgeoisie in France or Britain (2000: 17). Instead they invested more and more energy in their *Kultur*, their education and sensibility. This inward-seeking movement found its expressions to a great extent in poetry and music. The new emotional style of letter writing and styles of *Empfindsamkeit* and *Sturm und Drang* clearly point to this, and can easily be shown in poetical and musical detail. [34].[#N34]. Britain is somewhat a case of its own, since as early as the first half of the eighteenth century the commercial forces of a market society strongly affected the way culture was understood and used (Brewer 1997).

Studying longitudinal changes it is necessary to keep as many balls in the air as possible – not least those of power and economic strength – and to study how they interact and bounce into each other in unforeseen ways. This is one of Elias's fundamental lessons and a basic rule of unplanned social games (Adorno, on the other hand, seemed at any historical moment, to know the outcome of history). In Mennell's words:

The [game] models demonstrate the not-altogether-commonplace insight that the more relatively equal become the power ration among large numbers of people and groups ... the more likely is it that the outcome will be something that no single person or group has planned or anticipated. Elias considerably broadens the idea of the 'unanticipated consequences of

purposive social action', which Robert Merton traced back to (*inter alia*) Adam Smith's 'hidden hand' and Hegel's 'cunning of reason'. (Mennell and Goudsblom, 1998: 23).

This slow change in the power balance meant that, as the nineteenth century progressed, the taste of a new market-oriented capitalistic–industrial bourgeoisie came to overlap with the earlier court taste. Elias had already spoken of this process in *The Court Society*:

As soon as exclusive, elitist tendencies appear in bourgeois strata, they also express themselves in prestige symbols directed at maintaining the group's distance from others, while transfiguring its existence. In these symbols the group's existence is presented as an end in itself surrounded by its aura of prestige, even though in the case of bourgeois strata utilitarian values and economic interests mingle with the prestige-values. (2006: 112)

By that time we find ourselves in the so-called third period of Beethoven's music, and have left the musical process that I intend to write about.

To conclude: Dichotomous thinking *à la* Adorno sooner or later lands us in a straightjacket and limits epistemological thinking, and especially so, if the researcher has a prophetic disposition and little understanding of how and why cultural objects are used in everyday life. Elias thus might have been thinking of Adorno when he wrote in a later preface to *The Civilizing Process*:

Social phenomena in reality can only be observed as evolving and having evolved; their dissection by mean of pairs of concepts which restricts the analysis to two antithetical states represent an unnecessary impoverishment of sociological perception on both empirical and theoretical levels. (2000: 454)

Sociogenesis and psychogenesis work together.

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## Notes

1. It is, of course, in this context unnecessary to state something of Elias's importance. Adorno, however, might today be less known. So let me just quote the first sentence on Adorno in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: 'Theodor W. Adorno was one of the most important philosophers and social critics in Germany after World War II.' [\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. This immensely engaging book was written during the Second World War. It was first published as 'Philosophical Fragments' in 1944, and in 1947 as *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. [\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. Although Horkheimer and Adorno write in the foreword that 'the authorship of this book belongs to the Institute for Social research as a whole', I shall refer to it as Adorno *et al*. The book virtually amounts to a didactic version of *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*. [\[#N3-pt1\]](#)
4. We knew that Adorno earlier had been heavily involved in different music-sociological projects in America, but we solved the conflict between his conclusions and ours by holding that his were not empirically grounded. We didn't understand how his world of ideas was created in a Germany that later was lacerated both materially and spiritually by the wars and course of events in Europe. Nor did we

- have a good understanding of how Adorno, as a gifted intellectual child of his time, came to be *ein Bildungsmensch*. ♣.[#N4-pt1]
5. By contrast with the first wave, the language in which Adorno's thoughts were now debated was always English – see Aronowitz (1994); Docker *Postmodernism and Popular Culture – a Cultural History* (1994); Eagleton (1990); Paddison (1992, 1993) Zuidervaart (1994). ♣.[#N5-pt1]
  6. For a critical overview concerning Adorno's theories on popular music, see Middleton (1990). For a wide ranging collection, with introductions to Adorno's various writings on music, see the selection of Adorno's essays on music edited by Leppert (2002). ♣.[#N6-pt1]
  7. The Anglo-American term for *schlager* is Tin-Pan-Alley. ♣.[#N7-pt1]
  8. All things being equal I would still hold that this often is the case and a common use of the two forms of music. ♣.[#N8-pt1]
  9. This quotation is from the 1968 Postscript, in the revised edition of *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) p. 482; rock'n'roll, obviously, was not a dance in the 1930s. ♣.[#N9-pt1]
  10. The university library of Gothenburg University presently registers 48 books on Elias, a few of them in Swedish. The library holds the only copy of Elias's first book, *Über den Prozess...* in Sweden. The second book registered is *Die höfische Gesellschaft* (1969). ♣.[#N10-pt1]
  11. One early and important contribution was Lutz Neitzert's *Die Geburt der Moderne, der Bürger und die Tonkunst* (1990), where Elias's perspective on cultural processes has a significant role. ♣.[#N11-pt1]
  12. Note that to Elias his determining aim for sociology was rise it to a higher level of detachment, 'to steer the ship of sociology... between the ideologies of individualism and collectivism... to escape the traditional trap – the trap of polarities like that of "individual" and "society"' (1984: 135–6). ♣.[#N12-pt1]
  13. Obviously, my relationship as a musicologist to Elias is different to that of Adorno. I know that Adorno studied with the composer Anton Webern, wrote music himself, lectured on music etc. Elias liked especially the music of Mozart (personal information, Johan Goudsblom, October, 2010). ♣.[#N13-pt1]
  14. Norbert Elias, *Mozart – Zur Sociologie eines Genies* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp), 1991, and *Mozart – sociologiska betraktelser* [sociological reflections]. *över ett geni* (Stockholm: Aldebaran), 1991, but cf. *Mozart: Portrait of a Genius* (1993). The translation of the original title appears only in the 'Contents' and as the title above the essay in the recent publication in Norbert Elias, *Mozart and Other Essays on Courtly Art* (2010). ♣.[#N14-pt1]
  15. Steptoe is not, as I recently have noticed, a musicologist by training. He had, however, at the time written a book on Mozart in 1988. He mentions at one point *The Civilizing process*. ♣.[#N15-pt1]
  16. See the point made by Eric Baker and Stephen Mennell in 'Note to the text' in *Mozart and Other Essays on courtly Art*, p. xiii, concerning the first English publication as they write that the publisher 'changed the subtitle, no doubt, in the belief that the deletion of the word "sociology" ... would help to sell copies.' ♣.[#N16-pt1]
  17. This a-historical take on philosophy has until recently often been more the rule than the exception; see for example Steven Emmanuel (ed.), *Modern Philosophers – From Descartes to Nietzsche* (2000), p. x. For an excellent study that from an Elisian perspective also discusses the relation between sociology and philosophy see Kilminster (1998). ♣.[#N17-pt1]
  18. It was among the nobility not too uncommon that one had some practical knowledge of music, but one seldom played with just noble musicians. The distance to the employed musician would always be present in the mindsets if not always heard. ♣.[#N18-pt1]
  19. There are, however, a few caveats in the preface: 'We would not now maintain, without qualification every statement in the book; that would be irreconcilable without a theory which holds that the core of truth is historical, rather than an unchanging constant to be set against the movement of history. The work was written when the end of the Nazi terror was within sight; nevertheless, in not a few places the

- reality of our times is formulated in a way no longer appropriate to contemporary experience' (1997 [1969]: ix). [♣\[#N19-ptri\]](#)
20. See Adorno's own description of his 'Bildungsgang' in a letter to Alban Berg in H. Lonitz (ed.) *Theodor W. Adorno–Alban Berg Briefwechsel 1925–1935* (1997: 9–10). [♣\[#N20-ptri\]](#)
  21. For introductions and commentaries see DeNora (2003: 25ff.); Leppert in Adorno (2002: 513–34); Robert W. Witkin (1998: 28–68); and Subotnik (1991: 15–41). [♣\[#N21-ptri\]](#)
  22. A similar sentence is also found in a comment as he pronounces that the late style is the self-assuredness of the voidness of the individuality, the being in between: 'Darin beruht das Verhältnis des Spätstil zum Tode' [In that lies the late style's relation to death.] (Adorno 1993: 233). [♣\[#N22-ptri\]](#)
  23. Elias was also well aware of this process of styles. He writes that Mozart and Voltaire 'never ceased being guided by the accustomed good taste, which was demanded and monitored by society; their individual feeling never ruptured and destroyed the prescribed formal idiom... Beethoven, in whose hands the traditional formal and expressive idiom began to break up, was a far more marginal and transitional figure than Mozart or even Goethe. His inborn talent actually benefited from the fertility of the transitional situation. Later, however, in the succeeding generations, the break was complete. Here, in Schubert or Schumann, Heine or Balzac... the sure guidance was lost' (2006: 90–1). [♣\[#N23-ptri\]](#)
  24. See Frank Hentschel (2006), for an extraordinary study on the construction of the close connection between greatness of German art (including the music by, among others, Beethoven) and the German nation. [♣\[#N24-ptri\]](#)
  25. As Paddison (1993: 273) puts it: 'There is a very real problem with Adorno's approach, because he often gives the impression that there is a smooth continuum between technical analysis, sociological critique and philosophical-historical interpretation, in spite of the calculatedly fragmented form in which he presents his ideas'. [♣\[#N25-ptri\]](#)
  26. See for instance the first pages in his writings on Beethoven, where one work after another are commented on. What I find troubling is his wishes to understand music, as it were, from the inside of itself. We don't understand music, he would say, it understands us (Adorno, 1993: 15). [♣\[#N26-ptri\]](#)
  27. Michael Spitzer (2006), following in the footsteps of Adorno has written an engaging study on Beethoven's late style. My chief criticism with Spitzer's book, though, is that his perspective is, as the title says, 'music as philosophy' (p. 3). [♣\[#N27-ptri\]](#)
  28. DeNora, *After Adorno*, p. 26. [♣\[#N28-ptri\]](#)
  29. See for example Edward Fagan, 'Theodor Adorno', in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and Lambert Zuidervart, 'Theodor W. Adorno', in Zalta (ed.) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [♣\[#N29-ptri\]](#)
  30. One thus finds in Adorno's works, apart from a more conventional form of narrative, also lots of sentences with contradictions, dialectical reversals etc. that arguably sum up what cannot be fully explained as shown by these three random examples from *Aesthetic Theory* (1997): Art desires what has not yet been, though everything that art is has already been' (p. 134) and 'Artworks became for-themselves what they previously were in-themselves' (p. 247). The third example must be quoted in German and shows his insistence of the dialectical entanglement of true art and philosophy: 'Ihr [art] Gegenstand bestimmt sich als unbestimmbar, negativ. Deshalb bedarf Kunst der Philosophie, die sie interpretiert, um zu sagen, was sie nicht sagen kann, während es doch nur vom Kunst gesagt werden kann, indem sie es nicht sagt' (*Ästhetische Theorie*, 1997: 113). This book – a heroic *philosophical* undertaking to understand aesthetics as it were from inside aesthetics *own* understanding of aesthetic objects *themselves* – was found unfinished. [♣\[#N30-ptri\]](#)
  31. The basic question one stands before, thus, is how come to terms with the dialectical *workings* of his theories. I commented on this in my earlier article (1997): 'Nowadays it is easier to understand his world of ideas ... [how] he came to be the bearer of a German cultural tradition. Basically, these values had



become second nature to him through the socialization process ... Put simply, the aims of the Frankfurt School were to understand and to establish a dialogue with the German working class. With such a background it is easy today to understand why he so obstinately chose such a thorny path. Like a stubborn dialectician, he launched an assault on everyone and everything in a bitter – not to say negative – aesthetic duel. Richard Wolin expresses this well: ‘A dialectician’s dialectician, he plays the apparent antagonism between culture and barbarism for all its worth. He tries to stake out a position between the aesthete or *Kulturmensch*, who invokes cultural privilege as a sign of superiority, and the modern-day philistine, who, upon hearing the word ‘culture,’ immediately reaches either for his revolver (reputedly, Goering) or chequebook (Hollywood). Both extremes must be foresworn’ (in Edström 1997: 20).

♣.[#N31-ptr1]

32. Subotnik even writes that the relationship between structure in Beethoven’s music and culture surfaces through a complex form of mediation processes ‘which Adorno does not pretend to understand or elucidate adequately’ (Subotnik 1991: 19).♣.[#N32-ptr1]
33. As is well known to critics of Adorno, the followers of Schoenberg’s music are still a small minority, while the music of Stravinsky is often heard in a positive way. It thus seems as if Adorno’s reverse diagnosis and value judgment has now been fulfilled, but in a negative way.♣.[#N33-ptr1]
34. Earlier on, already in the 1720s, one can trace how the new musical style, *galant* style, meant a concentration on the leading melody and the oncoming of more reserved attitudes towards intricate polyphonic structures in music. As is well-known, in the 1730s the composer Johann Adolph Scheibe indirectly criticised Bach’s music as being too complicated either to perform or to hear. Indeed, as the Bach scholar Christoph Wolff has written: ‘An orientation toward the taste and needs of a wider public seems to have been entirely foreign to Bach’ (1991: 374).♣.[#N34-ptr1]

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