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# Music, Language, and Composition

Theodor W. Adorno (Translated by Susan Gillespie)

Music is similar to language. Expressions like musical idiom or musical accent are not metaphors. But music is not language. Its similarity to language points to its innermost nature, but also toward something vague. The person who takes music literally as language will be led astray by it.

Music is similar to language in that it is a temporal succession of articulated sounds that are more than just sound. They say something, often something humane. The higher the species of music, the more forcefully they say it. The succession of sounds is related to logic; there is a right and a wrong. But what is said cannot be abstracted from the music; it does not form a system of signs.

The similarity to language extends from the whole, the organized coherence of meaningful sounds, down to the single sound, the tone as the threshold of mere existence, the pure medium of expression. It is not only as an organized coherence of sounds that music is analogous to speech, similar to language, but also in the manner of its concrete structure. The traditional doctrine of musical forms has its sentence,<sup>1</sup> phrase, period, and punctuation. Questions, exclamations, subordinate clauses are everywhere, voices rise and fall, and, in all of this, the gesture of music is borrowed from the speaking voice. When Beethoven, referring to the performance of a Bagatelle from Op. 33, asks for "a certain speaking expression," he only emphasizes, in his reflection, an ever-present aspect of music.

The distinguishing element is commonly sought in the fact that music has no concepts. But quite a few things in music come rather close to the "primitive concepts" that are dealt with in epistemology. It makes use of recurring symbols, insignia that bear the stamp of tonality. If not concepts, tonality has, in any case, generated vocabularies: first the chords, which are always to be used in identical function, even worn-out combinations like the steps of a cadence, themselves often merely melodic phrases that reformulate the harmony. Such general symbols have the ability to merge with a particular context. They make room for musical specification, as the concept does

for individual things, and, like language, they are simultaneously healed of their abstractness by the context. But the identity of these musical concepts lies in their own existence and not in something to which they refer.

Their invariance has become sedimented, a kind of second nature. This is what makes it so difficult for consciousness to separate itself from the tonality. But the new music rebels against the appearance that characterizes such second nature; it does away with the congealed formulae and their function, as mechanical, but not with the similarity to language itself—only its reified version, which misuses its individual elements as mere markers, disqualified signals of no less rigid subjective meanings. Musically, too, subjectivism and reification correspond to each other, but their correlation does not describe conclusively the similarity of music to language in general. Today, the relationship of language and music has become critical.

In comparison to signifying language,<sup>2</sup> music is a language of a completely different type. Therein lies music's theological aspect. What music says is a proposition at once distinct and concealed. Its idea is the form<sup>3</sup> of the name of God. It is demythologized prayer, freed from the magic of making anything happen, the human attempt, futile, as always, to name the name itself, not to communicate meanings.

Music aims at an intention-less language, but it does not separate itself once and for all from signifying language, as if there were different realms. A dialectic reigns here; everywhere music is shot through with intentions—not, to be sure, only since the *stile rappresentativo*, which used the rationalization of music as a means of coming to terms with its resemblance to language. Music without any signification, the mere phenomenological coherence of the tones, would resemble an acoustical kaleidoscope. As absolute signification, on the other hand, it would cease to be music and pass, falsely, into language. Intentions are essential to it, but they appear only intermittently. Music points to the true language as to a language in which the content itself is revealed, but for this it pays the price of unambiguousness, which has gone over to the signifying languages. And as if to give it, the most eloquent of all languages, comfort for the curse of ambiguity—its mythical element—intentions stream into it. Time and again it points to the fact that it signifies something, something definite. Only the intention is always veiled. Not for nothing did Kafka, in several of his works, give to music a place that it had never before occupied in literature. He treated the meaningful contents of spoken, signifying language as if they were the meanings of music, broken-off parables—

this in the most extreme contrast to the “musical” language of Swinburne or Rilke, which imitates musical effects and which is alien to the origins of music. To be musical means to innervate the intentions that flash forth, without losing oneself to them in the process, but taming them, instead. Thus, the musical continuum is constructed.

This brings us to interpretation. Both music and language require it in the same degree, and entirely differently. To interpret language means to understand language; to interpret music means to make music. Musical interpretation is the act of execution that holds fast to the similarity to language, as synthesis, while at the same time it erases every individual incidence of that similarity. Hence, the idea of interpretation belongs to music essentially and is not incidental to it. But to play music properly means, above all, to speak its language properly. This language demands that it be imitated, not decoded. It is only in mimetic practice—which may, of course, be sublimated into unspoken imagination in the manner of reading to oneself—that music discloses itself, never to a consideration that interprets it independent of the act of execution. If one wished to compare an act in the signifying languages with the musical act, it would more likely be the transcription of a text than its comprehension as signification.

In contrast to the cognitive nature of philosophy and the sciences, in art the elements that are brought together for the purpose of knowing are never combined into judgment. But is music in fact language without judgment? Among its intentions, one of the most urgent seems to be “That is the way it is”—the judicious, even judging, affirmation of something that is, however, not expressly stated. In the highest, as well as the most violent moments of great music, such as the beginning of the reprise of the first movement of the Ninth Symphony, this intention, through the sheer power of its coherence, becomes distinctly eloquent. It resonates in lower works as parody, for example in the C-sharp minor prelude by Rachmaninoff that keeps hammering “That is the way it is” from the first to the last measure, while lacking that element of becoming that could lead to the state of being whose existence it affirms, abstractly and to no avail. Musical form, the totality in which a musical context takes on the character of authenticity, can hardly be separated from the attempt to create, for the nonjudging medium, the gesture of judgment. At times this succeeds so completely that the threshold of art is scarcely able to withstand the onslaught of logic’s desire to dominate.

Thus, one is led to conclude that the differentiation of music and language will emerge not from their individual traits, but only from the entirety of their constitution. Or rather from their direction,

their “tendency,” the word used with the most extreme emphasis on the *telos*, with regard to music in general. Signifying language would say the absolute in a mediated way, yet the absolute escapes it in each of its intentions, which, in the end, are left behind, as finite. Music reaches the absolute immediately, but in the same instant it darkens, as when a strong light blinds the eye, which can no longer see things that are quite visible.

Music shows its similarity to language once more in that, like signifying language, it is sent, failing, on a wandering journey of endless mediation to bring home the impossible. Except that its mediation unfolds according to a different law from that of signifying language, not in meanings that refer to each other, but in their mortal absorption into a context that preserves meaning even as it moves beyond that meaning with every motion. Music refracts its scattered intentions away from their own power and brings them together into the configuration of the name.

To differentiate music from the mere succession of physical stimuli, we sometimes say that music has sense, or structure. To the extent that in music nothing is isolated, and everything only becomes what it is in its physical contact with what is closest and its spiritual contact with what is farthest away, in remembrance and expectation, that statement may be allowed to pass. But the sense of its coherence is not of the type that is made by signifying language. The whole is realized against the intentions; it integrates them by means of the negation of each individual, indeterminate intention. Music as a whole rescues the intentions, not by diluting them into a more abstract, higher intention, but by readying itself, in the instant in which it crystallizes, to summon the intentionless. Thus, it is almost the antithesis of the kind of coherence that makes sense, even though it may appear as such in comparison to sensual immediacy. This is the source of its temptation, in the fullness of its power, to pull back from all sense, to behave as if it were in fact the name immediately.

Schenker has cut the Gordian knot of the old controversy and declared himself against the aesthetics of expression as well as the aesthetics of form. Instead—like Schoenberg, whom he scandalously underrates—he has aimed at a concept of musical content. The aesthetics of expression mistakes the individual, ambiguously escaping intentions for the intentionless content of the whole; Wagner’s theory falls short because it imagines the content of music as following from the expression of all musical moments infinitely extended; whereas to speak the whole is qualitatively different than to commit a single act of signification. The aesthetics of expression, where it is consistent,

ends with the temptingly arbitrary act of substituting what has been understood ephemerally and by accident for the objectivity of the thing itself. The opposite thesis, however, that of the forms set in motion by sounding,<sup>4</sup> comes down to empty stimulus or the mere existence of something that reverberates, where this stimulus lacks the relationship of the aesthetic *Gestalt* to something that is not itself, through which it first constitutes itself as aesthetic *Gestalt*. Its simplistic and thus once again popular criticism of signifying language is paid for with the price of the artistic. Music does not exhaust itself in intentions; by the same token, however, no music exists without expressive elements: in music even expressionlessness becomes an expression. “Sounding” and “in motion” are almost the same thing in music, and the concept of “form” does not explain anything about what is concealed, but merely thrusts aside the question of what is represented in the sounding, moving context that is more than mere form. Form is only the form of something that has been formed. The specific necessity, the immanent logic of that act eludes the grasp: it becomes mere play, in which literally everything could be otherwise. But in truth, the musical content is the wealth of all those things underlying the musical grammar and syntax. Every musical phenomenon points beyond itself, on the strength of what it recalls, from what it distinguishes itself, by what means it awakens expectation. The essence of such transcendence of the individual musical event is the “content”: what happens in music. If musical structure or form, then, are to be considered more than didactic schemata, they do not enclose the content in an external way, but are its very destiny, as that of something spiritual. Music may be said to make sense the more perfectly it determines its destiny in this way—not only when its individual elements express something symbolically. Its similarity to language is fulfilled as it distances itself from language.

Within music itself, music and language exist in a state of mutual tension. Music is reducible neither to the mere being-in-itself of its sound, nor to its mere being for the subject. Music is a means of cognition that is veiled both for itself and for the knowing subject. But it has this much, at least, in common with the discursive form of knowledge: it cannot be fully resolved in the direction of either the subject or the object, and each of them is mediated by the other. Just as those musics in which the existence of the whole most consistently absorbs and moves beyond its particular intentions seem to be the most eloquent, so music’s objectivity, as the essence of its logic, is inseparable from the element within it that is similar to language,

from which it derives everything of a logical nature. These categories are so thoroughly complementary that it is not, for instance, possible to maintain their balance by conceiving music as occupying a position equidistant between them. Rather, its success depends on the abandon with which it relinquishes itself to its extreme poles. This has been forcefully demonstrated in the history of the new music. Where it avoids the tension between music and language, it suffers the consequences.

The movement that is subsumed under the name of the new music could easily be represented from the perspective of its collective allergy to the primacy of similarity to language. At the same time, precisely its most radical formulations have tended more toward the extreme of similarity to language than toward the impulse that is hostile to it. With these formulations, the subject took aim against the burdensome, conventionalized weight of traditional material. But today it is evident that even those elements of the new music that, to a conventional way of thinking, are considered subjectivistic contain within them a second element that tends to work against the notion used in the nineteenth century to designate musical similarity to language—expression. The emancipation of dissonance is often identified with the untrammelled desire for expression, and the aptness of this equation is confirmed by the development from *Tristan* to *Elektra* to Schoenberg's *Erwartung*. But precisely in Schoenberg, the opposite also makes itself known early on. In one of his first works, the now much-beloved *Verklärte Nacht*, a chord occurs that sixty years ago was very shocking. According to the rules of harmony, it is not allowed: the ninth chord, in major, in an inversion that places the ninth in the bass, so that the resolution, the prime to that ninth, comes to lie above it; whereas the ninth, ostensibly, is meant to be heard as a mere suspension before the tonic. This chord, with its various possible resolutions, appears repeatedly in *Verklärte Nacht* at decisive turning points in the form in an intentionally nonorganic way. It creates caesuras in the idiom. In the First Chamber Symphony, Schoenberg proceeds in a similar way with the famous fourth chord, which is also not treated in traditional harmonic theory. It becomes the leading harmony and marks all the important divisions and articulations of the form. But it is precisely the expressive value of these chords that, in the context, is not essential. What is expressive and similar to language, rather, is that context itself.

Eloquence of this nature tends to flow, so much so that it must have sounded to the composer's critical form-awareness like an unresistant merging. The musical material of the chromaticism does not

contain the strong opposing forces of articulation required for plasticity of form and constructive “logic.” In fact, the articulation of the chromatics in *Tristan* had remained problematic, and Wagner only did justice to it, in his later works, in a rather rough and restorative way by alternating diatonic and chromatic complexes. This results in discontinuities like the one between the wildness of most of Strauss’s music in *Elektra* and its blissfully triadic conclusion. Schoenberg disdained any such option; hence, he had to find means of composition that would rise above the gliding of the chromatics without reverting back to a lack of differentiation. The solution lay precisely in those extraterritorial chords that had not yet been occupied by musical-linguistic intentions—a kind of musical new-fallen snow in which the subject had not yet left any tracks.

The whole field of resolution made up entirely of fourth chords and their melodic transcription in the orchestral version of the First Chamber Symphony has been very aptly compared to a glacial landscape. In the last movement of the F-sharp minor quartet, the new chords have been inserted as literal allegories of “another planet.”<sup>5</sup> It follows that the origin of the new harmony must be sought in the realm of the emphatically expressionless, as much as in the realm of expression, as much in hostility to language as in language—even though this hostile element, which is alien to the continuum of the idiom, repeatedly served to realize something that was linguistic in a higher degree, namely the articulation of the whole. If the dissonant harmonics had not always also sought the expressionless, it would scarcely have been possible for it to be transformed into the twelve-tone technique, in which, after all, the linguistic values at first recede very strongly in favor of constructive ones. This is how profoundly the antithetical elements are intertwined with each other.

But this intertwining has not been realized in all new music. Much of the latter has absented itself, with modish phrases, from the dialectical effort and merely rebelled reactively against the linguistic element. It is not only to the ears of rancorous philistines that the music of the nineteenth and early twentieth century must have sounded as if it had forgotten what was best about itself, as if the progress of musical similarity to language had been paid for with the authenticity of music itself. The weakening of its constructive powers and of the consciousness of totality in favor of vivid details, in Romanticism, was equated directly with the growth of expression and similarity to language. It was thought that simply by uprooting the latter it would be possible to regain what had been lost, without accepting the challenge of actually salvaging that best element from



the irrevocable state of both consciousness and material. Composers fell into a state of what Hegel would have termed abstract negation, a technique of consciously induced primitivism, of mere omission. Through an ascetic taboo against everything that was linguistic in music, they hoped to be able to grasp pure musicality in itself—a musical ontology, so to speak—as the residue, as if whatever was left over was the truth. Or, looked at in a different way, they repressed the nineteenth century instead of transcending it in the manner in which Plato's Diotima describes dialectics: "the old worn-out mortality leaving another new and similar one behind."<sup>6</sup> If music's similarity to language really fulfills itself by distancing itself from language, then this is attributable only to its immanent motion, not to subtraction or the imitation of prelinguistic models that are always revealed, in turn, as previous stages of the process between music and language.

The attempt to do away with music's similarity to language was undertaken in two directions. One is the path taken by Stravinsky. By means of an archaic reversion to musical models that seemed architectonic and far removed from language, and a further process of alienation that eliminated from them everything that today sounds similar to language, pure music, purified of all intentions, was supposed to result. But its intention-less character can only be maintained by doing violence to the origins that are sought after in this way. Wherever the weight of the musical idiom is apparent in the models, for example in the regular sequence of cadential forms, the models are tweaked and twisted until they no longer disavow the attempt. In this way, the pure essence of music is itself turned into a subjective performance. The scars that result are accompanied by expression, ferments of an idiom made of convention that is by turns affirmed and negated. The parodistic element—something eminently mimetic and thoroughly similar to language—is inseparable from such musical hostility to language. It could not sustain itself at the apex of its own paradoxicalness, where it had once executed the most astonishing balancing acts. Becoming more moderate, it reverted to sheer historicism and sank, in its reception by broader musical consciousness, to the depths of sanctimonious pseudomorphosis, the unaffirmed gesture of affirmation. The substitution of parodistic negation as absolute positivity, liberated from the superstructure of the subject, ends in mere ideology.

In its second, later form, the rebellion against musical similarity to language desires nothing less than to catapult itself out of history altogether. It is difficult to exaggerate the rage against the musical element: prisoners shaking the bars of their cells or people robbed of language driven mad by the memory of speech. The indestructible

traits of music that comprise its similarity to language are ostracized as the alien element in music, as mere distraction from its immanent logic, as if they, immediately and in themselves, were its perversion into a system of signs. In the heroic periods of the new music, the vehemence of the escape attempts—comparable to the tendency of early radical painting to absorb materials that mock all attempts at subjective inspiration, the fundamental phenomenon of montage—presents itself as an anarchic rebellion against the sense of musical coherence in general; the young [Ernst] Křenek's eruptions around the time of his Second Symphony are a case in point. Whereas this gesture, in Křenek, later manifests itself only in certain latent characteristics of composing against the grain, after the Second World War the same intention was revived and systematized by young composers whose starting point was their experience with the twelve-tone technique. In the *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, I had once observed that in Schoenberg the elements that are similar to language, to the extent that they form part of a musical coherence, remain essentially the same as in the tradition and thus contain a certain contradiction to the changes in the material. From this same observation, the young composers jump to the conclusion of a tabula rasa. They want to liquidate the element of musical language in music, to end subjectively mediated musical coherence itself and create tonal relationships dominated by exclusively objective, that is, mathematical relationships. Consideration of any reproducible musical sense, indeed of the possibility of musical imagination itself, is irrelevant. The remainder is supposed to be the cosmically superhuman essence of music. Finally, the process of composition itself is rendered physical: diagrams replace the notes; formulas for the generation of electronic sound replace the act of composition, which, itself, is ultimately seen as an arbitrarily subjective act.

But this objectivism in music turns into its opposite. The force that imagines it is overcoming the arbitrary rule of the subject, that obvious element of the possibility of doing everything differently—the very thing that had been striking fear into composers ever since its emergence during the Romantic era, which, nevertheless, encouraged it—is identical with complete reification: the desire to be pure nature corresponds to the purely manufactured thing. The ontological region that lies beyond subjective accident is exposed as subjective mastery over nature that has been absolutized as a mere technique, in which the subject of absolute rule only divests itself of its own humanity and simultaneously fails to recognize itself. Nothing can sound more accidental than music that ostracizes the ultimate act of discrimination;

the electronic production of sound, which thinks of itself as the voiceless voice of being itself, sometimes sounds like the droning of machinery. The utopia of a quasi supra-artistic art, which is to be had, it is true, only for the suspiciously low price of the substitution of alienated mechanical procedures for subjective effort, falls back into philistine tinkering of a sort not unlike the experiments with tone-color composition that were popular thirty years ago. Aesthetic lawfulness, the essence of which consists precisely in its antithesis to causality, is confused with the latter; autonomy with heteronomy. The hope is that a natural law that is taken literally and, moreover, misunderstood will replace musical language's lost aesthetic authoritative-ness. But with the proscription of everything that is even remotely similar to language, and thus of every musical sense, the absolutely objective product becomes truly senseless: objectively absolutely irrelevant. The dream of a wholly spiritualized music removed from the sully influences of the animalistic nature of human beings awakens among rough, prehuman material and deadly monotony.

Music suffers from its similarity to language and cannot escape from it. Hence, it cannot stop with the abstract negation of its similarity to language. The fact that music, as language, imitates—that on the strength of its similarity to language it constantly poses a riddle, and yet, as nonsignifying language, never answers it—must, nevertheless, not mislead us into erasing that element as a mere illusion. This quality of being a riddle, of saying something that the listener understands and yet does not understand, is something it shares with all art. No art can be pinned down as to what it says, and yet it speaks. Mere dissatisfaction with this fact will only undermine the principle of art without salvaging it as something else, for example discursive knowledge. While the idea of truth liberated from illusion remains essential to art, it is not within art's power to escape from appearance. Art comes closer to the idea of freedom from appearance by perfecting that appearance than it would by arbitrarily and impotently suspending it. Music distances itself from language by absorbing its peculiar strength.

The allergy to the linguistic element in music is inseparable, historically, from the turn away from Wagner. It refers, to use a metaphor from the Wagnerian world, to a wound that awakens the most violent emotions, at once unhealed and guilt-ridden. In fact, Wagner, with his radical demand for a declamation that would do justice to language, not only drew vocal music much closer to language than it had ever been before, and did so in a specifically mimetic way, but also assimilated musical construction itself to the gesture of language

to the point of exaggerated clarity. What music lost in the way of autonomous development, and what surrogate qualities it assumed as a result of the unbroken repetition of gestures similar to language, I do not need to say. True, anti-Wagnerianism of the ordinary variety is less incensed about regressive, compositionally amorphous traits than about explosive characteristics and the unleashing of the language of music, its emancipation from innumerable conventional elements that no longer satisfied the critical ear; whereas, nowadays, the preference, in many cases, is for restoring that very convention by force, as it were, outwardly, to serve as a bond.

Following the irreparable collapse of the traditional formal cosmos, however, it was only the adaptation to language that salvaged for music something of the power it had possessed at the height of the Beethovenian attempt to reconcile the autonomous subject, from within that subject, with the traditional forms. Music's turn toward language in Wagner not only created hitherto unimagined expressive values, not only gave the musical material a wealth of the most highly differentiated qualities without which it can no longer survive, but also gave this music a dimension of bottomless depth. It may have been characterized by a boastful tragicity, something theatrical and self-dramatizing. It is easy to hold up the comparison of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart, as more metaphysically substantial, but all this does is to drown out, with difficulty, the truth of its own particular moment. The devalorization of metaphysical sense, which was reflected in Wagner's relationship to Schopenhauer, was appropriate to the state of social consciousness under developed capitalism; the thing that makes it inauthentic, the murky and despairing conflation of such negativity with the positivity of redemption, still did more honor to the determining historical experience than the fiction that humanity had been spared this experience. For Wagner, however, this experience was not some mere *Weltanschauung* lacking in compelling force; it left its stamp on the musical form<sup>7</sup> itself. The idea of great music, of music as a serious matter instead of ornament or private amusement, survived the nineteenth century solely as a result of the Wagnerian turn of music toward language. The most recent negation of the linguistic element in music reveals the need of weakness to abscond from that serious matter, as from an "unfolding of the truth." It was only thanks to the Wagnerian finds that the middle Strauss and then Schoenberg were able to plow over the field of the musical material in such a way that it finally became fertile again, of itself and not merely as decreed by an autonomous logic. Only music that has once been language transcends its similarity to language.

Let us recall the operas of Alban Berg. In them, autonomous musical logic reigns side by side with the element of Wagnerian musical language. But the two principles generate each other in alternation. The purely musical articulation, the dialectical, sonata-like form through which Berg retrieves those very elements—present in Viennese Classicism and sacrificed by Wagner—succeeds precisely on the strength of the ruthless immersion of music in language, both literally and figuratively. If, amidst all its constructive unity, Berg's music, as distinguished from the levelling tendencies that can be observed in the most diverse regions of the new music, insistently maintained the variety of individual musical contents that renders that unity a result, and substantial, then the sole reason is because his music obeys the text's intentions in every single one of its motions in order to tear the music loose from them once more through the organization of its coherence. In this way, it gains a kind of intervention, something like a process involving contending elements, and this is what constitutes its seriousness.

At any rate, the position of contemporary music toward the similarity of music to language can be indicated clearly enough to suggest the shape of what is needed. There is still a considerable divergence between the tonal material, which has been rationalized and disqualified in the name of the twelve-tone technique, and the musical-linguistic structures—from music's large forms down to its tiniest units, the typical motivic gestures—which those persevering and most advanced composers Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern have generated with this material and its qualities derived from tradition. But the problem—to employ this much-misused word, for once, in the strict sense—would be to resolve that divergence by advancing the compositional process.

This undertaking can begin at either pole. On the one hand, like the idea of form that fits the material, in architecture, or of functional form, the rationalized tonal material itself presses for principles of musical form, a musical language *sui generis*. This had only been neglected due to the preoccupation with preparing that material as an end in itself. The fact, for example, that development and developing variation became superfluous and were thrust back into the predisposition of the material bespeaks a compositional process that proceeds by segments and is articulated by "intonations," a stratification of the large forms according to their parts, each of which tends to be equidistant from the center. The result would be a music in which the immediacy of every moment outweighs the musical perspective and its form as mediated by expectation and memory. Before the discovery of the

twelve-tone technique, Schoenberg had occasionally attempted something similar. Today, when one of the most gifted young composers, Pierre Boulez—who as one of the leading representatives of constructivism has always maintained a certain independence from its dogmas—takes his cue from Debussy as well as Webern, his instinct seems to lead him toward composition in segments. Such a reorganization of the musical structure according to the immanent laws of the material, as it unfolds, would also alter the entire language of music. Even the subtlest small articulations would be the result of tiny differentiations within the series, along with equally fine differentiations of the various forms of the series itself, and serial music would no longer have to speak as if its syntax were the one it inherited from tonality.

In the opposite case, the musical-linguistic forms can be similarly separated from the material and followed in their development, can be “constructed out,” so to speak. This corresponds to Berg’s practice and above all to that of the late Schoenberg, and also, oddly enough, to functional forms of music such as film scores. The task, in conscious mastery of the musical language, would be to crystallize out characters of a linguistic nature in themselves, Platonic ideas, as it were—of themes, transitions, questions and answers, contrasts, continuations abstracted from the musical material that was previously provided by tonality. Such a procedure is not without precedent; one could very easily find in Beethoven, whose compositional technique is much more rational than the irrationalism of our educational canon would have it, atomistic types of musical forms<sup>8</sup> that resemble a musical puzzle and are used over and over again and that are by no means conventional. They appear relatively independently of the flow of tonality, indeed of the progress of the individual compositions, and one of the elements of his art was to bring even these forms into harmony with the harmonic and formal progress of the whole.

But the attempts to wring its own separate language from the material, in the first case, and to treat language itself as material and make it self-reliant, in the second, converge in the free disposition over the means of composition. This is attained by the individual who abandons himself, in a kind of active receptivity, to that toward which the materials are striving on their own. This, however, would be nothing less than the mediation of subject and object. As one hears within the mere material the language that is enclosed within it, one becomes aware of the subject that lies concealed in that material; and as one breaks the linguistic elements, which without exception represent sedimented subjective feelings, out of their blind, quasi-primitive natural coherence and constructs them out oneself, purely,

one does justice to the idea of objectivity that characterizes all language in the midst of its subjective signification. So, in the end, music and language, in their most extreme dissociation, may once more merge with one another.

### Notes

Theodor W. Adorno, "Musik, Sprache, und ihr Verhältnis im gegenwärtigen Komponieren," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978) 649–64. Adorno's thoughts on this subject were originally published in 1953 in the volume *Musik und Dichtung. 50 Jahre Deutsche Urheberrechtsgesellschaft* (Munich) under the title "Fragment über Musik und Sprache." The version that is given here includes minor revisions to the first half and a new second half; it appeared twice in 1956 under the title "Musik, Sprache, und ihr Verhältnis im gegenwärtigen Komponieren" in a publication of the *Archivio di Filosofia* in Rome and in *Jahresring 56–57*, Stuttgart, 1956. The first half, which was included in the 1956 collection *Quasi una fantasia*, has recently been published in a collection bearing the same title, translated by Rodney Livingstone (Verso, 1992).

1. In German, the word for a musical movement, "Satz," is the same as the word for sentence. —Trans.
2. Throughout this essay, Adorno uses the phrase *meinende Sprache* to refer to ordinary spoken language. *Meinend*, in this usage, is quite idiosyncratic, which lends the phrase heightened importance. Semantically, it is related to *Meinung* (opinion); it should not be translated by its English cognate *meaning*, which is closer to the German *Bedeutung*. In the following, *meinende Sprache* has been rendered throughout as "signifying language." —Trans.
3. *Gestalt*. —Trans.
4. Adorno refers to Eduard Hanslick's definition in his treatise *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (1854), here in the translation by Martin Cooper, from the collection *Music in European Thought, 1851–1912*, ed. by Bojan Bajic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). —Trans.
5. The fourth movement of Schoenberg's string quartet No. 2, Op. 7, is based on a poem by Stefan George entitled "Entrückung," which contains the words "Ich fühle Luft von anderen Planeten" [I feel air from other planets]. —Trans.
6. From Plato's "Symposium," in: *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905, vol. I, p. 500. —Trans.
7. *Gestalt*. —Trans.
8. *Gestalten*. —Trans.