Chapter 6

Avant-Garde *and* Kitsch, or, Teddy the Musical!

"And what about the musical theatre?"
—Reporter to People's Commissar Lukács, 1919

Do you remember the night I held you so tight
As we danced to the Wiener Schnitzel Waltz?
—Tom Lehrer, 1953

Avant-Garde *and* Kitsch?

Adorno is often characterized as one of the most adamant Western advocates of an elitist high culture modernism and as a powerful opponent of industrially produced, commodified mass art. He trained as a composer under the tutelage of Berg and remained a fierce critical advocate of the atonal music of Schoenberg and his circle, including Berg and Webern as well as younger contemporaries such as Ernst Křenek and Hanns Eisler. Adorno was also an important theoretical and critical contributor to the discussions that shaped post–World War II European "New Music" at Darmstadt and elsewhere, which encompassed a range of new compositional techniques from the further radicalization of serial composition to electronic music and the *musique informelle* influenced by John Cage. Adorno stood for an uncompromising commitment to musical progress, as he conceived it, which meant for him above all exploring the dissonant expressivity of new music through the relentless pursuit of advanced compositional techniques. In his studies of contemporary popular culture and in his collaborative work with Horkheimer on the standardization of culture within an ever more consolidated Culture Industry, in contrast, Adorno identified much of the music hearable on the airwaves, on record players, and in performance as a kind of degraded, stereotypical trash. Along with Horkheimer, he believed that the Culture Industry functioned to close the productive gap of thought,

imagination, and experience between the artwork and the listener and to reduce both to a common industrial measure: standardized, schematic, unproblematic works produced for compliant, standardized consumers, themselves "mass-produced" to the measure of the goods they were being advertised and sold.

All this, certainly, could prepare us for a highly polarized and hierarchical view of the musical arts in Adorno's aesthetics, with singular works of technically advanced, serious, difficult, elitist, modernist art thoroughly segregated from popular, light, low-genre works that are nothing but shoddy products of a homogeneous Culture Industry. A very substantial part of the reception of Adorno's work has in fact accepted this dichotomous view, whether to advocate alongside Adorno for challenging works of new music, or, as is perhaps more common now, to argue against him in defense of jazz, rock, hip-hop, disco, electronica, or other popular musical forms.

While this dichotomizing view is not without evident ground in Adorno's texts, it nevertheless ignores subtler aspects of his musical aesthetics that blur and shade the gap between technically innovative experimental music and popular, including commercial, musical forms. In his concrete critical engagements with musical works, Adorno himself often complicates his own apparently binary schema with a more nuanced dialectic between popular and elite art forms. Over the span of his musical writings, from his early music criticism of the late 1920s and early 1930s, to his sociological studies of his American exile, to his mature writings from post-war Germany until his death in the late 1960s, though there are consistencies in his arguments and positions, there are also shifting accents and even on occasion significant revisions of earlier, more intransigent views of popular music.

Moreover, while Adorno emphatically canonized a short list of composers whose works advanced the technical development of the musical material and therefore, in his view, marshaled the weak critical forces of art against an increasingly inhuman society, his judgments of even these favored artists were rarely unequivocal. Typically, Adorno viewed the progressive achievements of individual artists or artworks within a force field of dialectical tensions, including between the extremes of the polarities made famous by Clement Greenberg, avant-garde and kitsch.[1] Like Greenberg, Adorno saw these artistic polarities as historically intertwined and even mutually constituted. But in at least some of his early music criticism around 1930, and tendentially even in his mature writings, Adorno went beyond suggesting, like Greenberg, that the avant-garde took dialectical impetus from defending contemporary art against the incursions of kitsch from the broader context of mass

society. Adorno also understood kitsch as a complementary if distorting mirror for the avant-garde, and hence likewise viewed it as a possible resource or improbable ally in the avant-garde's search for new formal and functional characteristics of art. Not avant-garde and kitsch as exclusive opposites, then, but rather: avant-garde *and* kitsch as a social-aesthetic force field from which new, individuated, progressive artworks might spring up.

Adorno's greatest concern with the Culture Industry was not, I would argue, the danger of kitsch invading art, but rather that the tension that exists between avant-garde and kitsch would be washed away in the standardization of a *middling*, middlebrow culture.[2] Already in his 1928 exposé for the Vienna-based music journal *Der Anbruch*, Adorno sought a *tertium datur* between the snobbish dismissal of kitsch in the name of culture "values" and pseudo-populist celebration of it: "Against everything that is merely elevated mediocre art, against the now rotten ideals of personality, culture, etc., kitsch must be played out and defended. But . . . one must not fall prey to the flat-out glorification of kitsch . . . as the true art of our times, because of its popularity."[3] Years later, in "The Schema of Mass Culture," an unpublished essay intended to be the sequel of the Culture Industry chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno would lament the disappearance of *both* avant-garde and kitsch, making his abiding fear of a neutralized sphere of *pseudo*-art explicit:

> There is no longer either kitsch or intransigent modernism in art. Advertising has absorbed surrealism and the champions of this movement have given their blessing to this commercialization of their own murderous attacks on culture in the name of hostility to the same. Kitsch fares no better as hatred towards it becomes its very element. Sentimentality is robbed of its implausible character, of that touching but impotent Utopian moment which for an instant might soften the hearts of those who have been hardened and take them beyond the reach of their even harder masters.[4]

Dialectics of Kitsch

In the early 1930s, a period in which Adorno was especially engaged with the compositions and performances of his contemporaries, he developed a nuanced conception of kitsch and its function within the current music scene. Though remarks on kitsch are scattered throughout his writings, with different accents, we find a concentrated attempt to situate kitsch within his musical aesthetics in a short unpublished text entitled "Kitsch" dating from around 1932. Notably, Adorno defines

kitsch as something other than just bad or tasteless or deficient art—and hence, something potentially justifiable and redeemable. He argues that kitsch is not a matter of the subjective shortcomings of the artist, whether in conception or execution, nor is it just a predilection of tasteless consumers; rather, it designates something *objective* in relation to the artwork and its forms. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno would recall this dialectical conception of kitsch first formulated thirty years earlier:

> Kitsch is not . . . the mere refuse of art, originating in disloyal accommodation to the enemy; rather, it lurks in art, awaiting ever recurring opportunities to spring forth. Although kitsch escapes, implike, from even a historical definition, one of its most tenacious characteristics is the prevarication of feelings, fictional feelings in which no one is actually participating, and thus the neutralization of these feelings. Kitsch parodies catharsis. Ambitious art, however, produces the same fiction of feelings; indeed, this was essential to it. . . . It is in vain to try to draw the boundaries abstractly between aesthetic fiction and kitsch's emotional plunder.[5]

Adorno was quite aware that the artistic intensities of Wagner's musical drama could end up in the kitschified Wagner cult ironized by Thomas Mann in his short stories "Tristan" (1903) and "The Blood of the Walsungs" (written 1905, published 1921) and even more savagely parodied by Georg Grosz in his Wagner *Gedenkblatt* from his 1922 album *Ecce Homo*, in which he depicts a corpulent, mostly nude German family engaging in Wagnerian cosplay. Similarly, the expressionist shriek rapidly settled into a mawkish "O Mensch!" note as its once radical gestures became conventional. The line between kitsch and avant-garde, between a poison that sickens and a poison that cures, is not a distinction between two essentially different sorts of artistic materials, but rather a bifurcation in the developmental tendencies of the artistic materials themselves as they unfold in new historical contexts.

Rather than existing in a "free-floating aesthetic" way, Adorno argues, kitsch takes shape historically and socially, as earlier artistic forms become, under the pressure of contemporary forces, reified and obsolete. Noting that one possible etymology of the word "kitsch" traces it to the English "sketch,"[6] Adorno observes:

> In music, at any rate, all real kitsch has the character of a model. It offers the outline and draft of objectively compelling, pre-established forms that have lost their content in history, and for which the unfettered artist, cast adrift, is not able to fashion the content on his own. Hence the illusory character of kitsch cannot be unambiguously traced to the individual inadequacy of the artist, but, instead, has its own objective origin in the downfall of forms and materials in history. Kitsch is the precipitate of devalued forms and empty ornaments in a formal world that has become remote from its immediate context.[7]

In turn, as an expression of reification, kitsch functions ideologically to conceal the current social situation of its consumers, by conjuring obsolescent forms of experience. However, Adorno also sees kitsch as having a contemporary justification in being a remembrance of a form-world that had a stronger objectivity than is now presently possible as artistic conventions disintegrate and artworks become ever more contingent and singular. Lastly, the concept of kitsch itself evolves historically. In this latter function of remembrance, kitsch becomes an unexpected partner of the avant-garde in exposing the compromises of the middling, moderate forms of the "juste milieu," which can claim neither the objectivity of past forms nor the radicalized invention of new forms. In the current moment, then, kitsch's sentimental remembrance of long-reified conventions may be in league with the aggressive anti-conventionality of the avant-garde, while the tasteful dismissal of kitsch may serve only to delude middlebrow cultural producers and consumers that the canonized forms they take for granted are still intact. Paradoxically, opposition to kitsch becomes, as the disavowal of the historical disintegration of artistic forms, a self-deluding, sublimated manifestation of kitsch itself. As Adorno archly puts it, "Thus the talk about kitsch itself begins to be kitschy, as it succumbs to the very historical dialectic from which its object emerged" ("Kitsch," 504).

This dialectical valuation of the low as the enemy of the middling informs other instances in which Adorno affirms the function of kitsch in the social field of art. In his 1960 monograph on Gustav Mahler, for example, Adorno positively evaluates Mahler's incorporation of low-culture, popular elements as a way of perspectivizing and invigorating the refined idioms of German nineteenth-century music:

> The unrisen lower is stirred as yeast into high music. The rude vigor and immediacy of a musical entity that can neither be replaced nor forgotten: the power of naming is often better protected in kitsch and vulgar music than in a high music that even before the age of radical construction had sacrificed all to the principle of stylization. This power is mobilized by Mahler. Free as only one can be who has not himself been entirely swallowed by culture, in his musical vagrancy he picks up the broken glass by the roadside and holds it up to the sun so that all the colors are refracted.[8]

He goes on to make the even starker claim that the aesthetic success of Mahler's work is inseparable from its intimacy with kitsch: "Not despite the kitsch to which it is drawn is Mahler's music great, but because its construction unties the tongue of kitsch, unfetters the longing that is merely exploited by the commerce that the kitsch serves" (39).[9] Yet in this recognition of kitsch as an expressive resource despite—or even because of—its degraded status, Adorno reprises more directly

avant-garde views that he had first articulated in the late twenties and early thirties when confronting new works by young composers such as Weill, Křenek, Hindemith, and Eisler, who embraced elements of popular culture and metropolitan life to challenge social hierarchies embedded in received musical forms and functions. Not accidentally, in his 1930 review of Weill's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, Adorno identifies the ghost of Mahler wandering among Weill's designedly skeletal popular forms: "One hears a peculiar strain of Mahler throughout the opera, in its marches, its ostinato, its dulled major and minor chords. Like Mahler, it uses the explosive force of 'low' elements to break through the middle and partake of the highest."[10]

In fact, Adorno saw the nearly unbridgeable divide between high and low, "serious" and "light," elite and popular music not as a historical constant nor as the logical derivation of a transcendental structure of taste, but rather as a regrettable product of the development of class society, and at its exasperated extreme, as a characteristic expression of contemporary late capitalist modernity. Adorno did not believe that, having historically emerged, this divide could or should be nostalgically disavowed, as if it did not constitute an objective condition within which any composer, whether artistic or commercial, had to work, or as if it could be merely formally subsumed in a hybrid work of, for example, symphonic jazz or popularized classical music. But it could be registered, reflected on aesthetically, and critically displaced, through the experience and working through of formal tensions and stylistic dissonances within artistic works.

As the example of Mahler suggests, one of the ways in which this indexing of social contradictions might take place is by incorporating high–low formal and material tensions into the work itself. Adorno was critically allergic to composers and works in which he detected a will to what he called in his debate with Lukács an "extorted reconciliation" of these contradictions: examples include, for him, Stravinsky and Hindemith at the top of a list of far less distinguished figures. But as a corollary to his criticism of these composers, he positively evaluated composers who preserved within musical forms the internal contradictions of both elite and popular musical materials, acknowledging the potential social isolation and loss of communicability of the former, and the potential routinization and regression of artistic communication in the latter. Or as Adorno concluded in another context:

> Though attempts to define kitsch usually fail, still not the worst definition would be one that made the criterion of kitsch whether an art product gives form to consciousness of contradiction—even if it does so by stressing its opposition to reality—or dissembles it. . . . As something that has escaped

> from reality and is nevertheless permeated with it, art vibrates between this seriousness and light-heartedness. It is this tension that constitutes art.[11]

Adorno was also able to perceive a critical value to amateur or otherwise artistically impoverished performances of musical works, insofar as such performances, in contrast to virtuosic ones, lay bare the contradictions that expert performances cover with a layer of aesthetic semblance, keeping them from rising to consciousness. As he writes in a note from 1954 following a lecture by Rudolf Kolisch at Darmstadt:

> Lively music-making, by children, amateurs, entertainers and such like, supplies the theory [of musical reproduction] with the most important exemplary material. First, because here the music appears with all its cracks and holes, so to speak, deconstructed into the elements of every dimension of which it is constituted, and through it one can observe, as with broken toys, how it "works." The tears are so many windows onto the problems of interpretation that proficient execution normally conceals, but then one can see in the approaches of those subjects all those things that also inspire bad *official* music-making, but which are covered up there by good manners, by the "good musician"; the normal musical education is nothing other than the history of such concealment. One should understand and deduce Toscanini from the perspective of the Frankfurt Palmengarten orchestra, and Bruno Walter from the salon trio of the Hotel Waldhaus in Sils-Maria.[12]

Adorno here presents tasteless performance as the secret sharer of the deceptively "fine" performance of the guardians of musical good taste. This dialectic would inform Adorno's affirmation of the raw and ugly sonorities that Křenek and Weill availed themselves of in their music of the 1920s. Yet Adorno's suggestion goes deeper, to the structural contradictions of musical works themselves and the role of performance in repressing them or allowing them to come to awareness in the listener. He implies that works of music, even the most elevated, have the capacity to become kitsch if, in their performative realization, constitutive tensions are dissembled rather than made perceptible. Ironically, then, one form of bad art becomes the counterpoison to a far more dangerous form. The amateur's scuffing of the aesthetic polish of the well-executed work protects it from its own potential to become high-culture kitsch; through its debasement, its truth-value may be renewed.

But Stay, Weill—You're Quite Good Looking!

I now turn in greater detail to a key example for Adorno of this artistic negotiation of high-elite and low-popular forms, or formulated more abstractly, of art's serious and lighthearted aspects: Kurt Weill. Adorno

found a thought-provoking example in the early musical theatre works of Weill, for whom he had an ambivalent admiration and, during their shared exile in the United States in flight from fascism, an on-again, off-again friendship. Adorno dedicated a number of short reviews and essays to Weill's work, spanning a period of nearly thirty years and extending beyond the death of Weill in 1950. During the 1930s, still himself a practicing composer, Adorno even attempted to write a Weill-influenced musical theatre piece—or "*Singspiel*," as Adorno characterized it—based on the popular Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer characters of the American novelist Mark Twain, entitled *Der Schatz des Indianer-Joe*.[13] Though he ultimately abandoned the project, leaving only a libretto behind, it formed the basis of a tense exchange of letters between Adorno and Benjamin, who was at the time at work on his cultural history of nineteenth-century Paris, the *Arcades Project*.[14]

When Adorno, Weill, and Brecht were all in exile from fascism in the United States in the 1940s, Adorno sought—unsuccessfully—to intercede with Weill on a new staging of Brecht and Weill's musical success of the late 1920s, the *Threepenny Opera*. As Adorno wrote from Los Angeles to Weill on March 31, 1942:

> Now as far as the performance itself is concerned, we are talking here about the founding of a Negro theatre on a national level, backed by Paul Robeson and the so-called Negro Lodges, therefore considerable moral backing, with financial consequences, if successful, which offer you and Brecht good prospects. The *Dreigroschenoper* should be the first work to be showcased on this stage by this group.[15]

Although Adorno was at least partly seeking to lend a practical hand to the impoverished exile Brecht, the nature of the proposed production was highly surprising if one accepts too easily the image of Adorno as uncompromisingly mandarin and anti-popular. The production—perhaps inspired by Virgil Thomson's successful 1934 staging of Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, George Gershwin's 1935 "folk opera" *Porgy and Bess*, and the recent formation of Negro Theatre Units in several cities under the Federal Theatre Project[16]—was to involve an all-Black cast and adapt Brecht and Weill's late Weimar social satire to the new context of midcentury US race and class relations, including treating Weill's original arrangements to a jazz adaptation. Notably, too, Adorno suggested that this California-launched initiative could prove strategic as a means of shaking up what he conceived to be the conservative, standardized musical theatre of Broadway. Though in a letter to Lotte Lenya, Weill implies that he gave Adorno a thorough tongue-lashing for sticking his nose where it didn't belong,[17] Weill's actual response to

Adorno was bluntly honest in rejecting his suggestions, yet in fact not uncordially or insubstantively engaged with Adorno's arguments for the project. First, Weill completely rejects Adorno's dismissal of Broadway as narrow and artistically closed and offers a full-throated defense:

> What you say about the "Broadway Theatre" is, in my opinion, absolutely wrong. I have other people from over there [i.e. California] seen [*sic*] making the same mistake. They see a few shows on Broadway, they compare them with the best things they have seen in German and they pass a judgement on the entire American Theatre. . . . I have made a thorough study of the American theatre and I have seen all the important shows in this country, on Broadway and outside of Broadway, in the last seven years, and I can assure you that they have done just as much "experimental" theatre of every type here as we have done in Germany. They had the expressionistic theatre, the epic theatre and the surrealist theatre. . . . [N]ext to Russia, Broadway is today the most interesting theatre center in the world. You are entirely wrong when you say that any theatre experiment has to be done somewhere else and then forced on Broadway.[18]

And despite his unconcealed irritation with Brecht's failure to consult him at the outset of the project several months earlier, Weill also expresses his willingness to compromise, out of compassion for the Black actor Clarence Muse, who had collaborated on the script for the 1939 musical film *Way Down South* with Langston Hughes, later also to be Weill's librettist for the 1946 musical *Street Scene*, and to some extent even out of understanding for Brecht's worrisome financial precarity. Weill tells Adorno: "This poor fellow Clarence Muse wrote me a desperate letter. He is really in an awful position. I have therefore decided to put aside all my doubts and all my objections and have worked out a proposition which would allow them to go ahead with their production, but to show it in California only. I have to see it first and see if I want my music to be used or not" (Weill to Adorno, 5). Unfortunately, further discussions transpired and even thornier complications and conflicts between Weill and Brecht arose, to the point that Weill angrily pulled out altogether. The proposed staging was never realized.[19]

Musical Potpourri

Before turning to Adorno's writings on Weill, I would like first to briefly explore a generic term that Adorno likely took over from Křenek and in turn applied in his critical assessments of Weill's works such as *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, written in collaboration with Brecht. It appears in a number of different contexts in Adorno's music criticism, including in the writings on

Culture Industry of the 1940s, but has particular resonance in his critical writings of the late 1920s and early 1930s. That term is the musical "potpourri."

In this context, "potpourri" refers to the presentation of musical material, usually in light and popular forms such as operettas and revues, that is sequential and without thematic development or repetition. Though dating to the eighteenth century, it especially characterized light, comic forms of stage music in the nineteenth century; it thus has a close affinity with operetta and eventually the musical as well. Adorno employs it in this context, for example, in his 1928 essay on Schubert, in which he refers to the mediation of the biography and music of Schubert through sentimental Austrian kitsch cultural products such as Rudolf Hans Bartsch's popular novel *Schwammerl* (Mushrooms, 1912) and Heinrich Berté's operetta drawn from it and a pastiche of Schubert's music, *Das Dreimäderlhaus* (The House of Three Girls, 1916), which was also the source of enormously popular American Broadway and British adaptations (US: *Blossom Time*; UK: *Lilac Time*) and several film adaptations as well. Surprisingly, given his later hardening against such Culture Industry products, Adorno finds in such kitschy potpourri a hollowing out from within of the illusion of organic form developing from its own immanent forces, and the replacement of the living artwork with an ossified skeleton of motifs that the potpourri strings together. "No theme, once past, could bear such emphatic proximity to another," Adorno writes; "one senses a terrible rigor mortis in the opera potpourris of the nineteenth century."[20] Living form is replaced by a reified crystalline structure that reveals something essential about Schubert's music that is concealed by romantic ideology, the potential denaturing of its putatively organic unity, in short, its secret affinity to the broader reification of the public sphere:

> The cells that are layered in the potpourri must have been interwoven according to a different law than the unity of living entities. Even if one concedes that Schubert's music, relatively speaking, is one that grew rather than being fashioned: its growth, very much fragmented and never content with itself, is not herbaceous but, rather, crystalline. By reinforcing the original configurative separation of Schubert's traits, and thus the constitutively fragmentary nature of his music, the conserving transition to the potpourri illuminates the entire Schubertian landscape. One should not mistake it for a coincidence that, in the nineteenth century, the potpourri developed as a surrogate musical form at the same time as the miniature landscape became popular for bourgeois consumer items of all kinds, culminating in the postcard. ("Schubert," 28)

Here Adorno is less concerned with the poor quality and sentimentality of Berté's potpourri of Schubert than with the truth it unwittingly

reveals about Schubert's music even as it condenses it into treacle: "At irregular intervals, like a seismograph, Schubert's music registered the message of humanity's qualitative change. The response, fittingly, is that of weeping—whether it is the weeping of the most impoverished sentimentality in *Das Dreimäderlhaus* or the weeping of a shaken body. . . . [W]hat it holds up to our fading, overflowing eyes . . . are the ciphers of an eventual reconciliation" ("Schubert," 45–46).

Another short essay on popular music that Adorno wrote in 1934, "Music in the Background," treats the experience of music performed in cafés and is highly relevant to his contemporary understanding of Křenek's and Weill's musical achievement. This essay, remarkably, in light of the stereotypical image of Adorno, ascribes a special authenticity to the awkward rearrangements and imperfect performances of outmoded music from the repertoire of nineteenth-century opera and romantic music. The potpourri is, for Adorno, responsible for the characteristic sound and experience of the café background. "Has anyone ever listened carefully to this sound?" he asks.[21] The music, he suggests, is stripped of its aesthetic trappings and blends with the environment in a way that almost hyperbolically submits to obsolete convention, thus becoming, compared to the experience of artistic concert music, refreshingly, even innovatively, stripped of aesthetic pretense:

> Nowhere has music become so wholly appearance as in the café. But in appearance, it is preserved. It must, or so it seems, be thus emancipated from all human seriousness and all genuineness of artistic form if it is still to be tolerated by human beings amidst their daily affairs without frightening them. But it is its appearance that lights up for them. No—that lights them up. They do not change in it, but their image. . . . Background music is an acoustic light source. ("Music in the Background," 508)

This musical function, that of illuminating the anomymous background of metropolitan modernity and allowing the human forms in it to appear in sharper, more distinct focus, is fulfilled by the potpourri's dissolved forms:

> Everything is in arrangements for the salon orchestra, which falsifies and alters it. It softens conceived passages into intimacy, blows up tender ones with tremolo and vibrato. The works dissolve in all this, and dissolved works, by those once-famous, then forgotten masters, are the right ones for background music. The question is only whether they stop at dissolution. In dissolution the works fall silent. Here they become audible again. (508)

In Adorno's exposition of the potpourri form, moreover, the emphasis falls not only on the mixed, miscellaneous quality of the potpourri, but also the reified *deadness* of its elements. Drawing upon the dual sense

of potpourri, Adorno compares these arrangements as comparable to "bouquets of dead flowers" (508). Deadness, however, is not, for him, a solely negative aspect. It supports the very possibility of the efficacy of the potpourri to fulfill its social function of adaptation to the background to everyday life:

> The joints between the brittle sounds into which they are layered are not firmly bonded. Through them shimmers the mysterious allegorical appearance that arises whenever fragments of the past come together in an uncertain surface. What is true for the vertical sound is no less true horizontally, for the passage of time. The cafés are the site of potpourris. The latter are constructed out of the fragments of the work, its best-loved melodies. But they awaken the ruins to new, ghostly life. (508–9)

The potpourri's pastiche-like assembly of conventional elements and effects does not pretend to reanimate convention with new organic life. It rather illuminates the artificial, even uncanny tension between mechanical energy and enervation of the café environment, as these tunes jostle and jar across the isolated but aggregated conversations, encounters, conspiracies, and deals going on intermittently at the tables. It is this aspect of the potpourri too which, Adorno argues, Mahler turned into a rigorous compositional procedure of renewing disintegrated popular forms:

> What in the potpourri was the necessity of indiscriminately assembling hackneyed melodies becomes in him the virtue of a structure that sensitively thaws the frozen groupings of accepted formal types. . . . It assists the decayed themes it accumulates to an afterlife in the second language of music. . . . In his works the potpourri form, through the subterranean communication of its scattered elements, takes on a kind of instinctive, independent logic. (*Mahler*, 35)

The notion of potpourri took on new actuality in the 1920s with modernist composers such as Křenek and Weill, as they explored jazz, cabaret music, film music, and other popular forms as inspirations for the destructured, episodic montage-forms of the modernist *Zeitoper* and *Singspiel*. For example, Křenek composed a "Potpourri for Large Orchestra, op. 54" in 1927, contemporaneously with his most famous *Zeitoper*, *Jonny spielt auf*; it was especially marked by the influence of French neoclassicism but included a variety of incongruously juxtaposed musical styles.[22] A solo piano "Potpourri aus Jonny *spielt auf*, op. 45" in an arrangement by the young Hungarian composer Jenő Takács appeared the following year.[23] Even while modernist composers such as Schoenberg and Berg rejected potpourri, in their writings of the late 1920s they took note of its prevalence among younger contemporaries.

Thus, in a 1928 article entitled "The 'Problem of Opera'" in which he justifies his use in *Wozzeck* of larger-scale developmental forms more typical of symphonic music, Berg suggested that operas that appropriated the elements of popular culture in potpourri forms merely reflected contemporary modernity, but—artistically, as well as, implicitly, sociologically—lacked means to point beyond it into the future: "The use of 'contemporary' means—such as cinema, revue, loudspeakers, jazz—guarantees only that such a work is contemporary. But that cannot be called a real step forward; after all, this is the point we have reached, and we can't get further on simply by being here."[24] In a December 1929 letter to Schoenberg, he quipped that he had "to do my utmost to see that *Wozzeck* isn't staged as the 'Two-Penny Opera.'"[25]

For his part, Schoenberg wrote up a wittily biting send-up of his students and contemporaries—including Křenek and Adorno—in his 1929 "Glosses on the Theories of Others," responding to recent issues of the music journals *Der Anbruch* (which had Adorno among its major contributors) and *Melos*. Schoenberg offers the following hyperbolically mixed metaphor to define the potpourri:

> If music is frozen architecture, then the potpourri is frozen coffee-table gossip, instability caught in the act, a parody of all logical thinking. It is justified, to any degree at all, only as a harmless travesty; it behaves as people behave when they get together socially—jumping from one thing to another, so that an egg-recipe suggests Columbus, a match a risqué story, and the decline of the world a boxing match—all involuntary associations against which primitive brains are defenceless, to which they succumb, being able to link them only by the word "and": A and X. Potpourri is the art of adding apples to pears; its law applies without being able to divide, and it multiplies through non-repetition. It is an accumulation, a mass of things adding up to nothing. It has parts but no articulation, combination but no cohesion. A pen-knife is sewn on to a nose, and a town clock on to the knife, and a mood on to the lot.[26]

More seriously, with respect to Křenek, who according to Schoenberg characterizes his operas as being composed in this manner, Schoenberg suggests that this simply may be self-misrecognition on Křenek's part, his theory not capturing what is actually going on formally in his works. He suggests that the original creative act, which conceives an opera as a unity, is preserved even if the composer rearranges and interleaves the parts according to a constructive, montage-like logic: "the creator's potential could be sufficiently strong to ensure the work's adhering to its 'status nascendi' sufficiently long—the creative act's being sufficiently extended—for there still to be an awareness, when individual sections were interchanged, of the formal requirements resulting from previous and succeeding sections. In that case, even transpositions and new

interpolations would satisfy the will to form, in accordance with the original conception" (314). In short, Schoenberg asserts that Křenek's operas do not in fact instantiate the arbitrariness of the potpourri. Potpourri is a false theoretical description for the loosened but still valid compositional forms that Křenek has invented and himself been bound by in realizing his works.

Adorno utilized the concept of "potpourri" to speak of Weill's work already in 1929, in his review of the *Threepenny Opera* and even more explicitly in a review of Weill's orchestral suite derived from the *Threepenny Opera* in the "Little Threepenny Music for Wind Ensemble." Adorno anticipates his own formulation of the potpourri as "acoustic lighting" in concluding his 1929 *Threepenny Opera* review. He writes:

> With none of the *Threepenny Opera*'s melodies can one perform reconstruction; their excavated simplicity is no less than classical. But ultimately they can nevertheless be played in bars, whose half-darkness they suddenly illuminate, as if sung in country fields. . . . Successful interpretation of what is already past constitutes the signal of a future element that becomes visible because the aged has become interpretable.[27]

In his review of Weill's orchestral suite "Little Threepenny Music," Adorno from the outset makes the potpourri the conceptual lever of his reflections: the potpourri is the result of a historical process of disintegration of the opera and operetta, which in turn becomes a resource for compositional innovation on Weill's part. "The step from the opera to the potpourri," Adorno writes,

> is pre-indicated to a music that from the first beat on has to do with fragments of a sort that would otherwise constitute the potpourri; the potpourri changes them back into their true form that the merely apparent unity of the relationship of their surfaces had concealed. . . . Memory-shards of the exploded essences of opera and operetta contract in [Weill's *Threepenny Opera*] to the density of dreams and alarm us as if they had risen from the realm of the past and with all the marks of their destruction.[28]

If Adorno emphasizes the contiguity of the *Threepenny Opera* to the potpourri form, Weill's "Little Threepenny Music" represents in his view a further radicalization of this relation, a further disintegration of the musical material and deployment of montage technique as compositional means:

> Now Weill has also derived from the *Threepenny Opera* the potpourri that was always hidden within it, already in the text, the cohesion of which so often explodes, as if an anonymous potpourrist had stridden around in it, with the modulations, which are themselves like the wreaths of our tone-master, and with all the themes, which are singable but not well rhymed, rather arrayed

> in artificial arbitrariness. This has now thus truly been emancipated from the last semblance of a form-totality, one after the other, without anything in between. ("Kleine Dreigroschenmusik," 541–42)

In his 1930 notes to *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, Weill remarked his progress with this opera beyond the more episodic *Singspiel* form—a successor to the potpourri—and his use of more extensive musical construction connecting the narrative "situations": "The 'Song' form established in the Baden-Baden piece [the 1927 *Mahagonny Singspiel*], and carried on in such subsequent works as *The Threepenny Opera*, the *Berlin Requiem* and *Happy End*, was of course inadequate for a full-length opera; it needed to be supplemented by other, larger-scale forms."[29] In his 1930 review of *Mahagonny*, Adorno follows Weill's lead in presenting the opera as a dialectical overcoming of potpourri forms: "this music, cobbled together from triads and wrong notes, the nails hammered down with the strong beats of old music-hall songs that are not known but remembered as parts of the genetic makeup, and glued with the stinking adhesive of softened opera potpourris—this music, made from the ruins of past music, is entirely contemporary" ("Mahagonny," 197). As Adorno concludes, despite its disparate material, the opera is "through-composed, unfolding according to its own infernal standards" (198). The tension between disparateness and construction is integral to Weill's theatrical as well as musical intentions, though the musical logic is now primary. The music, Weill notes, "no longer furthers the plot"; rather, the sequence of its twenty-one "self-contained musical forms," as Weill notes, lend the individual narrative tableaux a "dramatic form only in the course of their musically dynamic succession."[30]

Vanguard of the Musical

Adorno's later reflections on Weill modulate these early formulations, especially in light of Weill's success in America in composing popular musicals and songs, but also retain this basic view of Weill's achievement as bound to his attempt to explore the tension between popular and avant-garde music.[31] In a controversial obituary for Weill in 1950, Adorno argued that in bringing a Brechtian epic-theatre demontage and remontage of materials to musical works, Weill demonstrated "an extraordinary and original sense for the function of music in theatre."[32] Adorno went on to suggest, provocatively, that Weill's greatest achievement may have been in recasting the role of contemporary composer

as a "musical director [*Musikregisseur*]," in the sense of a theatre or even film director. He notes Weill's affinities, in the deep-seated dramatic and performative qualities of his music, to Stravinsky, and like Stravinsky, Weill is named as a key source of an ambiguous legacy in twentieth-century music. "It would hardly be an exaggeration to say," Adorno concludes, "that the rudimentarization of so much contemporary music, its retrogressive hostility to experiment, is inseparable from the conscious experiments of Weill" ("Kurt Weill," 546). Yet Adorno would continue to elaborate in more sympathetic ways this legacy of Weill as "musical director," for example, in his essay from 1955 entitled "After a Quarter Century," originally presented as program notes to the Düsseldorf premiere of Weill's Broadway musical *Street Scene*. In this essay, Adorno evaluates Weill's dramatic alienation of musical material as allowing a successful suspension of the divide between serious and light, avant-garde and popular idioms:

> The change of musical function with Weill had as its result that the musical director no longer acknowledged firm boundaries between serious and light music. The collective impulses that he obeyed were stronger than the artistic education, otherwise neo-classical and hostile to expression, that he had received from Busoni. . . . But his extraordinarily alert and aggressive literary sense had, in those of his works that count, likewise protected him from simply giving himself over to attractive popular music. A fruitful disturbing element intruded. He heard, spurred by Stravinsky, manifestations of light music to be already so false and perforated, as its inner substance is, and perceived the true monstrosity of the musical. This lent him his characteristic mobility, a music of rags and debris, as oblique to the demands of high art as to the kitsch of the serial production line.[33]

In this short essay Adorno is not uncritical of Weill, particularly his American-period popular works; yet he generally acknowledges the artistic accomplishment of Weill in negotiating an ambivalent, paradoxical role with regard to popular music and its public: "He partook of the paradox of a music that electrified the public and yet slapped in the face all the demands of the public that he himself fulfilled. By the force of this paradox the image of musical culture trembled like a wavering [*wacklige*] curtain. Between the two poles of a split musical consciousness this image ignited" ("Nach einem Vierteljahrhunderts," 551). In another essay originally published in 1957 and revised in 1966, "Questions of the Contemporary Opera-Theatre," in contrast, Adorno's judgment of Weill's American works is much harsher:

> [H]is extraordinary accomplishment as musical director [*Musikregisseur*], his instinct for the montage of musical scraps in the *Threepenny Opera* proved itself only so long as he rigorously renounced authentic composition. As soon

> as he allowed himself to be steered by great musical forms, he failed and through the striving for higher things that he once had mocked fell under the spell of the mere theatre of amusement, the American musical.[34]

I will conclude by remarking a curious polemical exchange about Weill in the journal *Der Monat* in 1956, in which Adorno answered an essay by the critic Horst Koegler entitled "Vortrupp des Musicals" (Vanguard of the Musical) with his own essay entitled "Vortrupp und Avantgarde: Eine Replik" (Vanguard and Avant-Garde: A Reply). Remarking on the staging of Weill's *Street Scene* in Düsseldorf, Koegler had taken issue with the negative responses of German critics, in which he saw entrenched prejudice against popular music and especially the American musical. Taking a jocular swipe at Adorno, Koegler wrote that these critics propagated "a progressivism at any price . . . to which any true public success would already in advance be suspicious (incidentally, an excellent theme for Adorno: 'The Aging of the New Criticism')."[35] In terms that recall Weill's response to Adorno in their correspondence about Brecht's plan for a reprised *Threepenny Opera*, Koegler accuses the critics of ignorance and prejudice against the American musical theatre to which Weill had brought significant innovations:

> The view that Broadway's influence is soul-killing and corrupting for every artist is so widespread here that its cultural-political consequences cannot be ignored. In fact, the condemnation of Weill wavers according to the political standpoint of the critic (or their papers): pretty much everything can be encompassed from the infinite feeling of superiority of the tradition-conscious European who casually looks down on the fully automatic American mix-culture, to the regretful *mea culpa* that it was in the end we ourselves who exiled Weill to this wasteland of brimming fleshpots. (69)

Adorno himself clearly estimated the earlier, "Brechtian" Weill more highly than the later writer of American musicals and hit songs and on this point is unbending in his response to Koegler: "One need only play songs out of the old edition of *Mahagonny* and the *Threepenny Opera* and immediately afterward such as 'Lady in the Dark' and 'One Touch of Venus,' and one will hear all that which Weill had to sacrifice to the bad smoothness of popular music."[36] But he grants the form of the popular musical two points in balance. First, he argues that the relaxing form of the musical was a healthy antidote to the nationalistic bombast of "new German" musical drama, which in Adorno's view was both aesthetically unbearable and compromised by its relation to fascism. And he restates anew his argument that in his early works Weill managed to hold serious and light music in tension in a way that genuinely blurred their boundaries, shining a spotlight on the contingency of the social

divide that exists between an elite avant-garde listenership and the mass public of popular music.

In defending his position against Koegler, Adorno suggests that the problem lies not with the popularity of the musical, but rather with its failure to develop its progressive, even populist potentials functionally and formally. Yet if this is the case, Adorno argues, critics such as Koegler do not help release these potentials by their affirmative posture towards popular music, but rather stand in league with the forces that standardize and deform it. To Koegler's tweaking about "the aging of the new criticism," Adorno offers a "counterproposal." Koegler, he writes,

> should compose an essay entitled "The Highbrow as Lowbrow." Since the break between advanced art and broader reception became radical, there have been intellectuals who have hoped to break out of their socially prescribed isolation by spasmodically and masochistically defecting to the other side. They have intended to save the fractured spirit through alliance with hostility to spirit. (803)

The onus, then, Adorno argues, "lies not with overreaching critics, but with musicals which, purged of such ferment [as that which Weill represented], declined into a kitsch, the seamlessly planned effects of which are not better but worse than that of old-fashioned kitsch, in which awkwardness and helplessness at the same time allowed unrestrained impulses to pass through" (803).

Notes

1. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 (1939): 34–49.
2. For more on "middlebrow" culture, see Dwight McDonald, "Masscult and Midcult" (1960), in McDonald, *Masscult and Midcult: Essays against the American Grain* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011), 3–72; Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
3. Theodor W. Adorno, "Zum *Anbruch*: Exposé," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 19, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), 602. For further discussion of this problematic of kitsch in Adorno's thinking of the late 1920s and early 1930s, see Levin, "For the Record," 27–28.
4. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 68.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Greta Adorno and Rolf

Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 239.

6. A keyword entry from the University of Chicago's *Theories of Media* website contextualizes Adorno's etymological suggestion in a far more uncertain field of possible derivations: "Though its etymology is ambiguous, scholars generally agree that the word 'kitsch' entered the German language in the mid-nineteenth century. Often synonymous with 'trash' as a descriptive term, kitsch may derive from the German word *kitschen*, meaning *den Strassenschlamm zusammenscharren* (to collect rubbish from the street). The German verb *verkitschen* (to make cheap), is another likely source. Similarly, the Oxford English Dictionary defines kitsch in the verb form as 'to render worthless,' classifying kitsch objects as 'characterized by worthless pretentiousness.' Other potential sources also include a mispronunciation of the English word *sketch*, an inversion of the French word *chic*, or a derivation of the Russian *keetcheetsya* (to be haughty and puffed up)." See https://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/kitsch.htm#_ftn2 (accessed December 31, 2021).
7. Theodor W. Adorno, "Kitsch," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 501.
8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 36.
9. For an insightful discussion of Adorno's complex views on kitsch and their connection to his interpretation of Mahler, see Richard Leppert, "Nature and Exile: Adorno, Mahler and the Appropriation of Kitsch," in Leppert, *Sound Judgment: Selected Essays* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 247–62.
10. Theodor W. Adorno, "Mahagonny," in *Night Music: Essays on Music, 1926–1962*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Wielan Hoban (London: Seagull Books, 2009), 199.
11. Theodor W. Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?", in *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 249.
12. Theodor W. Adorno, *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction*, trans. Wieland Hoban, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 127.
13. The libretto was first published in 1979 as Theodor W. Adorno, *Der Schatz des Indianer-Joe: Singspiel nach Mark Twain*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp Verlag, 1979). Tiedemann's afterword appeared in English translation as "Adorno's *Tom Sawyer* Opera Singspiel," trans. Stefan Bird-Pollan, in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 376–94. Though much of the music was never composed, a recording of two songs from the incomplete *Singspiel* were recorded in 1988 in the Alten Oper Frankfurt; see Theodor W. Adorno, *Kompositionen*, CD, Wergo 6173-2, 1990.
14. See the letters of Benjamin to Wiesengrund-Adorno, January 29, 1934, and Wiesengrund-Adorno to Benjamin, March 4, 1934, in Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 23–27.
15. Letter of Adorno to Weill, March 31, 1942, *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 21/2 (2003): 4.

16. See Ronald Ross, "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935–1939," *The Journal of Negro History* 59/1 (1974): 38–50.
17. See letter of Weill to Lotte Leyna, April 8, 1942, in *Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya*, eds. Lys Symonette and Kim Kowalke (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 320.
18. Letter of Weill to Adorno, April 7, 1942, *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 21/2 (2003): 5.
19. For details of this failed staging, see Joy H. Calico, *Brecht at the Opera* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 78–83.
20. Theodor W. Adorno, "Schubert," in *Night Music*, 26.
21. Theodor W. Adorno, "Music in the Background," in *Adorno on Music*, 507.
22. For more detail on *Potpourri*, op. 54, see Alexander Carpenter's 2017 preface to the score at: https://repertoire-explorer.musikmph.de/wp-content/uploads/vorworte_prefaces/3014.html (accessed December 31, 2021).
23. "Potpourri aus der Oper Jonny spielt auf von Ernst Křenek op. 45," Piano Solo (Vienna-Leipzig: Universal Edition, 1927).
24. Alban Berg, "The 'Problem of Opera'," in Willi Reich, *Alban Berg*, trans. Cornelius Cardew (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), 63.
25. Letter of Alban Berg to Arnold Schoenberg, December 10, 1929, in *The Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence: Selected Letters*, ed. Juliane Brand, Christopher Hailey, and Donald Harris (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 392–93.
26. Arnold Schoenberg, "Glosses on the Theories of Others," in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 314–15.
27. Theodor W. Adorno, "Zur Dreigroschenoper," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 18, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), 540.
28. Theodor W. Adorno, "Kurt Weill: Kleine Dreigroschenmusik für Blasorchester," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 18, 541.
29. Kurt Weill, "Notes to My Opera *Mahagonny*," in Bertolt Brecht, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie*, eds. John Willett and Ralph Manheim, trans. W.H. Auden and Chester Kalman (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996), 91.
30. Weill, "Notes to My Opera *Mahagonny*," 92.
31. For further consideration of Adorno's relation to Weill's European and American works, see also Lydia Goehr, "*Amerikamüde/Europamüde*: The Actuality of American Opera," in Goehr, *Elective Affinities: Musical Essays on the History of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 257–306.
32. Theodor W. Adorno, "Kurt Weill," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 18, 544.
33. Theodor W. Adorno, "Nach einem Vierteljahrhunderts," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 18, 550.
34. Theodor W. Adorno, "Fragen des gegenwärtigen Operntheaters," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 19, 486.
35. Horst Koegler, "Der Vortrupp der Musicals," *Der Monat* 8/1 (1956): 69.
36. Theodor W. Adorno, "Vortrupp und Avantgarde: Eine Replik," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 18, 801.