

# A SOCIAL CRITIQUE OF RADIO MUSIC

By T. W. ADORNO

SOME would approach the problem of radio by formulating questions of this type: If we confront such and such a sector of the population with such and such a type of music, what reactions may we expect? Or: How many sectors of the population have been brought into contact with music and how do they respond to it?

What intention lies behind such questions? This approach falls into two major operations:

(a) We subject some groups to a number of different treatments and see how they react to each.

(b) We select and recommend the procedure which produces the effect we desire.

The aim itself, the tool by which we achieve it, and the persons upon whom it works are generally taken for granted in this procedure. The guiding interest behind such investigations is basically one of *administrative* technique: how to manipulate the masses. The pattern is that of market analysis even if it appears to be completely remote from any selling purpose. It might be research of an *exploitive* character, i.e. guided by the desire to induce as large a section of the population as possible to buy a certain commodity. Or it may be what Paul F. Lazarfeld calls *benevolent* administrative research, putting questions such as, "How can we bring good music to as large a number of listeners as possible?"

I would like to suggest an approach that is antagonistic to exploitive and at least supplementary to benevolent administrative

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research. It abandons the form of question indicated by a sentence like: How can we, under given conditions, best further certain aims? On the contrary, this approach in some cases questions the aims and in all cases the successful accomplishment of these aims under the given conditions. Let us examine the question: how can good music be conveyed to the largest possible audience?

What is "good music"? Is it just the music which is given out and accepted as "good" according to current standards, say the programs of the Toscanini concerts? We cannot pass it as "good" simply on the basis of the names of great composers or performers, that is, by social convention. Furthermore, is the goodness of music invariant, or is it something that may change in the course of history with the technique at our disposal? For instance, let us take it for granted — as I do — that Beethoven really is good music. Is it not possible that this music, by the very problems it sets for itself, is far away from our own situation? That by constant repetition it has deteriorated so much that it has ceased to be the living force it was and has become a museum piece which no longer possesses the power to speak to the millions to whom it is brought? Or, even if this is not so, and if Beethoven in a musically young country like America is still as fresh as on the first day, is radio actually an adequate means of communication? Does a symphony played on the air remain a symphony? Are the changes it undergoes by wireless transmission merely slight and negligible modifications or do those changes affect the very essence of the music? Are not the stations in such a case bringing the masses in contact with something totally different from what it is supposed to be, thus also exercising an influence quite different from the one intended? And as to the large numbers of people who listen to "good music": how do they listen to it? Do they listen to a Beethoven symphony in a concentrated mood? Can they do so even if they want to? Is there not a strong likelihood that they listen to it as they would to a Tchaikovsky symphony, that is to say, simply listen to some neat tunes or exciting harmonic stimuli? Or

do they listen to it as they do to jazz, waiting in the introduction of the finale of Brahms's First Symphony for the solo of the French horn, as they would for Benny Goodman's solo clarinet chorus? Would not such a type of listening make the high cultural ideal of bringing good music<sup>2</sup> to large numbers of people altogether illusory?

These questions have arisen out of the consideration of so simple a phrase as "bringing good music to as large an audience as possible." None of these or similar questions can be wholly solved in terms of even the most benevolent research of the administrative type. One should not study the attitude of listeners, without considering how far these attitudes reflect broader social behavior patterns and, even more, how far they are conditioned by the structure of society as a whole. This leads directly to the problem of a social critique of radio music, that of discovering its social position and function. We first state certain axioms.

(a) We live in a society of commodities — that is, a society in which production of goods is taking place, not primarily to satisfy human wants and needs, but for profit. Human needs are satisfied only incidentally, as it were. This basic condition of production affects the form of the product as well as the human interrelationships.

(b) In our commodity society there exists a general trend toward a heavy concentration of capital which makes for a shrinking of the free market in favor of monopolized mass production of standardized goods; this holds true particularly of the communications industry.

(c) The more the difficulties of contemporary society increase as it seeks its own continuance, the stronger becomes the general tendency to maintain, by all means available, the existing conditions of power and property relations against the threats which they themselves breed. Whereas on the one hand standardization necessarily follows from the conditions of contemporary economy, it becomes, on the other hand, one of the means of preserving a

commodity society at a stage in which, according to the level of the productive forces, it has already lost its justification.

(d) Since in our society the forces of production are highly developed, and, at the same time, the relations of production fetter those productive forces, it is full of antagonisms. These antagonisms are not limited to the economic sphere where they are universally recognized, but dominate also the cultural sphere where they are less easily recognized.

How did music become, as our first axiom asserts it to be, a commodity? After music lost its feudal protectors during the latter part of the 18th Century it had to go to the market. The market left its imprint on it either because it was manufactured with a view to its selling chances, or because it was produced in conscious and violent reaction against the market requirements. What seems significant, however, in the present situation, and what is certainly deeply connected with the trend to standardization and mass production, is that *today the commodity character of music tends radically to alter it*. Bach in his day was considered, and considered himself, an artisan, although his music functioned as art. Today music is considered ethereal and sublime, although it actually functions as a commodity. Today the terms ethereal and sublime have become trademarks. Music has become a means instead of an end, a fetish. That is to say, music has ceased to be a human force and is consumed like other consumers' goods. This produces "commodity listening," a listening whose ideal it is to dispense as far as possible with any effort on the part of the recipient — even if such an effort on the part of the recipient is the necessary condition of grasping the sense of the music. It is the ideal of Aunt Jemima's ready-mix for pancakes extended to the field of music. The listener suspends all intellectual activity when dealing with music and is content with consuming and evaluating its gustatory qualities — just as if the music which tasted best were also the best music possible.

Famous master violins may serve as a drastic illustration of

musical fetishism. Whereas only the expert is able to distinguish a "Strad" from a good modern fiddle, and whereas he is often least preoccupied with the tone quality of the fiddles, the layman, induced to treat these instruments as commodities, gives them a disproportionate attention and even a sort of adoration. One radio company went so far as to arrange a cycle of broadcasts looking, not primarily to the music played, nor even to the performance, but to what might be called an acoustic exhibition of famous instruments such as Paganini's violin and Chopin's piano. This shows how far the commodity attitude in radio music goes, though under a cloak of culture and erudition.

Our second axiom — increasing standardization — is bound up with the commodity character of music. There is, first of all, the haunting similarity between most musical programs, except for the few non-conformist stations which use recorded material of serious music; and also the standardization of orchestral performance, despite the musical trademark of an individual orchestra. And there is, above all, that whole sphere of music whose life-blood is standardization: popular music, jazz, be it hot, sweet, or hybrid.

The third point of our social critique of radio concerns its ideological effect. Radio music's ideological tendencies realize themselves regardless of the intent of radio functionaries. There need be nothing intentionally malicious in the maintenance of vested interests. Nonetheless, music under present radio auspices serves to keep listeners from criticizing social realities; in short, it has a soporific effect upon social consciousness. The illusion is furthered that the best is just good enough for the man in the street. The ruined farmer is consoled by the radio-instilled belief that Toscanini is playing for him and for him alone, and that an order of things that allows him to hear Toscanini compensates for low market prices for farm products; even though he is ploughing cotton under, radio is giving him culture. Radio music is calling back to its broad bosom all the prodigal sons and daughters whom

the harsh father has expelled from the door. In this respect radio music offers a new function not inherent in music as an art — the function of creating smugness and self-satisfaction.

The last group of problems in a social critique of radio would be those pertaining to social antagonisms. While radio marks a tremendous technical advance, it has proved an impetus to progress neither in music itself nor in musical listening. Radio is an essentially new technique of musical reproduction. But it does not broadcast, to any considerable extent, serious modern music. It limits itself to music created under pre-radio conditions. Nor has it, itself, thus far evoked any music really adequate to its technical conditions.

The most important antagonisms arise in the field of so-called musical mass-culture. Does the mass distribution of music really mean a rise of musical culture? Are the masses actually brought into contact with the kind of music which, from broader social considerations, may be regarded as desirable? Are the masses really participating in music culture or are they merely forced consumers of musical commodities? What is the role that music actually, not verbally, plays for them?

Under the aegis of radio there has set in a retrogression of listening. In spite of and even because of the quantitative increase in musical delivery, the psychological effects of this listening are very much akin to those of the motion picture and sport spectatoritis which promotes a retrogressive and sometimes even infantile type of person. "Retrogressive" is meant here in a psychological and not a purely musical sense.

An illustration: A symphony of the Beethoven type, so-called classical, is one of the most highly integrated musical forms. The whole is everything; the part, that is to say, what the layman calls the melody, is relatively unimportant. Retrogressive listening to a symphony is listening which, instead of grasping that whole, dwells upon those melodies, just as if the symphony were structurally the same as a ballad. There exists today a tendency to listen

to Beethoven's Fifth as if it were a set of quotations from Beethoven's Fifth. We have developed a larger framework of concepts such as atomistic listening and quotation listening, which lead us to the hypothesis that something like a musical children's language is taking shape.

As today a much larger number of people listen to music than in pre-radio days, it is difficult to compare today's mass-listening with what could be called the elite listening of the past. Even if we restrict ourselves, however, to select groups of today's listeners (say, those who listen to the Philharmonics in New York and Boston), one suspects that the Philharmonic listener of today listens in radio terms. A clear indication is the relation to serious advanced modern music. In the Wagnerian period, the elite listener was eager to follow the most daring musical exploits. Today the corresponding group is the firmest bulwark against musical progress and feels happy only if it is fed Beethoven's Seventh Symphony again and again.

In analyzing the fan mail of an educational station in a rural section in the Middle West, which has been emphasizing serious music at regular hours with a highly skilled and resourceful announcer, one is struck by the apparent enthusiasm of the listeners' reception, by the vast response, and by the belief in the highly progressive social function that this program was fulfilling. I have read all of those letters and cards very carefully. They are exuberant indeed. But they are enthusiastic in a manner that makes one feel uncomfortable. It is what might be called standardized enthusiasm. The communications are almost literally identical: "Dear X, Your Music Shop is swell. It widens my musical horizon and gives me an ever deeper feeling for the profound qualities of our great music. I can no longer bear the trashy jazz which we usually have to listen to. Continue with your grand work and let us have more of it." No musical item was mentioned, no specific reference to any particular feature was made, no criticism was offered, although the programs were amateurish and planless.

It would do little good to explain these standard responses by reference to the difficulty in verbalizing musical experience: for anybody who has had profound musical experiences and finds it hard to verbalize them may stammer and use awkward expressions, but he would be reluctant, even if he knew no other, to cloak them in rubber stamp phrases. I am forced to another explanation. The listeners were strongly under the spell of the announcer as the personified voice of radio as a social institution, and they responded to his call to prove one's cultural level and education by appreciating this good music. But they actually failed to achieve that very appreciation which stamped them as cultured. They took refuge in repeating, often literally, the announcer's speeches in behalf of culture. Their behavior might be compared with that of the fanatical radio listener entering a bakery and asking for "that delicious, golden crispy Bond Bread."

Another study led to a similar observation. A number of high school boys were subjected to an experiment concerning the role of "plugging" in achieving popularity for popular music. They identified, first, those songs played most frequently on the air during a given period — that is, those songs rating highest according to the *Variety* figures — with those they regarded as the most popular ones according to general opinion. Further, they identified those songs which they regarded as most popular with those they happened to like themselves. Here it is particularly opportune to make clear the approach of a social critique. If we took such a case in isolation, it might appear that radio, by a kind of Darwinian process of selection, actually plays most frequently those songs that are best liked by the people and is, therefore, fulfilling their demands. We know, however, from another section of our study, that the "plugging" of songs does not follow the response they elicit but the vested interests of song publishers. The identification of the successful with the most frequently played is thus an illusion — an illusion, to be sure, that may become an operating social force and in turn really make the much-played a success: be-

cause through such an identification the listeners follow what they believe to be the crowd and thus come to constitute one.

The standardization of production in this field, as in most others, goes so far that the listener virtually has no choice. Products are forced upon him: His freedom has ceased to exist. This process, however, if it were to work openly and undisguised, would promote a resistance which could easily endanger the whole system. The less the listener has to choose, the more is he made to believe that he has a choice; and the more the whole machine functions only for the sake of profit, the more must he be convinced that it is functioning for him and his sake only or, as it is put, as a public service. In radio we can witness today something very similar to those comic and paradoxical forms of competition between gasolines which do not differ in anything but their names. The consumer is unwilling to recognize that he is totally dependent, and he likes to preserve the illusion of private initiative and free choice. Thus standardization in radio produces its veil of pseudo-individualism. It is this veil which enforces upon us scepticism with regard to any first-hand information from listeners. We must try to understand them better than they understand themselves. This brings us easily into conflict with common sense notions, such as "giving the people what they want."

This raises the question of controls and safeguards against biased imagination. Music is not a realm of subjective tastes and relative values, except to those who do not want to undergo the discipline of the subject matter. As soon as one enters the field of musical technology and structure, the arbitrariness of evaluation vanishes, and we are faced with decisions about right and wrong and true and false. I should like to give some examples of what I call musico-technological control of sociological interpretation. I mentioned above the social tendency toward a pseudo-individualism to hide the increase of standardization. This tendency in today's mass-produced music can be expressed in precise technical terms. Musical analysis can furnish us with plenty of materials

which manifest, so far as rhythmical patterns, sound combinations, melodic and harmonic structures are concerned, that even apparently divergent schools of popular music, such as Sweet and Swing, are essentially the same. It can further be shown that their differences have no bearing on the musical essence itself. It can be shown that each band has assumed certain mannerisms with no musical function and no other purpose than to make it easier for the listener to recognize the particular band — such as, say, the musically nonsensical staccati with which Guy Lombardo likes to end certain legato phrases.

And now an example from the field of serious music. If we analyze a score of a Beethoven symphony in terms of all the thematic and dynamic interrelationships defined in the music, develop the necessary conditions of fulfilling its prescriptions by a performance, and then analyze the extent to which these prescriptions can be realized by radio, the proposition that symphonic music and the radio are incompatible becomes concretely defined and, so to speak, measurable. Here again the formulation of research problems is affected by our critical outlook. I suspect that people listen to serious music largely in terms of entertainment. Our technical analysis allows us to formulate this suspicion in exact terms. Studies on the Radio Voice have shown that with regard to such categories as the prevalence of sound colors, emphasis on detail, the isolation of the main tune, and similar features, a symphony on the air becomes a piece of entertainment. Consequently it would be absurd to maintain that it could be received by the listeners as anything but entertainment. Entertainment may have its uses, but a recognition of radio music as such would shatter the listener's artificially fostered belief that they are dealing with the world's greatest music.