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Between Adorno and HIP: Possibilities of Synthesis

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For a long time, in the English-speaking world, Adorno has been viewed as probably the first major opponent to Historically Informed Performance, or HIP, a coruscating adversary towards the plethora of instrumental and stylistic practices that has accompanied this movement. This perception has its roots above all in the one essay dealing in part with performance that has been available in English for a substantial period, 'Bach Defended against his Devotees', the later sections of which specifically alludes to then relatively new approaches to the performance of Bach's music.

This Adorno essay remains significant, and its concepts and arguments are not necessarily negated by the rest of Adorno's output – including *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction* [TTMR] – but its foundations and implications need to be further investigated in the context of this paper. Adorno wrote this essay in 1951 as a response to constructions of Bach that occurred in 1950, as part of the bicentennial of Bach's death. In West Germany, the organisers of the Bach celebrations (who included Friedrich Blume, a musicologist deeply complicit with Nazi ideology) presented a particular view of Bach's work, owing a good deal to the ideas of Albert Schweitzer. By this view, the religiosity, mysticism, fixation upon death and supposed conservatism of Bach were emphasised, in stark opposition to attempts in East Germany to portray Bach in that mixture of nationalism and Stalinist communism that so characterised the official culture: Bach was an authentic voice to be held up against capitalism and American imperialism, and whose work had been distorted by pro-religious and formalist criticism¹. Adorno rejected the view of Bach as backward-looking or as a passive conveyor of religious ideology, drawing attention instead to the immanent logic of the musical material in Bach's work, which existed in a dialectical (rather than purely subservient) relationship to the formal, stylistic and generic models which it inhabited. In no sense was Bach a 'restorative' composer, but rather one who employed the possibilities bequeathed by the most advanced musical language of his time within archaic forms, thus creating a unique form of inner tension. As he said, 'it is precisely the archaic-sounding pieces which are often the most daring, not merely in terms of their contrapuntal combinations, which indeed draw directly on the earlier polyphonic arrangements, but also with regard to the most advanced aspects of the general effect'². However, certain modes of performance, those which aim to recreate historical conditions and practice, mitigate against the articulation of these vital elements. Referring to what Adorno believes to be 'an irresistible crescendo' in the C# minor triple fugue on Book 1 of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, with climaxes 'with the mighty explosion of the man theme entering in the bass, the most extreme concentration of a pseudo-ten voice *stretto* and the turning point of a heavily accented dissonance, in order then to vanish as though through a dark portal', he argues that the inability to produce dynamic contrast on the organ or harpsichord makes it impossible to render 'the basic dynamism of the

¹ See Toby Thacker, *Music after Hitler, 1945-1955* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 127-150 for more on this.

² Adorno, 'Bach Defended Against his Devotees', p. 140.

compositional structure itself' then, interestingly appeals not so much to the composer's intention in arguing for the use of the later instrument with the power to vary dynamics, but to the 'intrinsic nature' of the work, with 'the objective law peculiar to it' which he claims need not coincide with 'the conception that a composer has of his music'³.

Adorno goes on to launch his polemic against the performance of Bach 'under the unholy star of Historicism'. And it is this passage which was perhaps most fundamental influential on the development of the ideas on performance by Richard Taruskin, who cites Adorno very briefly in his essay 'The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past'⁴, but whose indebtedness to Adorno's ideas both here and elsewhere is stronger than he would like to admit. The 'historicism' that Adorno decries was rooted in the 'Bach to Bach' movement of the 1920s, manifested through aesthetics of neo-classicism and the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, appealing to Bach's supposed objectivism in opposition to pre-First World War late romanticism. This wide-ranging aesthetic movement encompassed many composers of the time, including Stravinsky and Hindemith, the neo-classicist phase of Schoenberg's early atonal music, all of which Adorno criticised strongly elsewhere, and younger figures such as Wolfgang Fortner, who soon afterwards went on to be a full member of the Nazi Party.

Adorno contrasts the book-keeping like priorities of the historicists, concerned 'to see that no inauthentic dynamics, modifications of tempo, oversize choirs and orchestras creep in', with the possibility that 'any more humane impulse become audible in the rendition', for which 'they seem to wait with potential fury'⁵. Similarly Taruskin, linking such an aesthetic to wider artistic and intellectual figures including Ortega y Gasset and Ezra Pound – as well as drawing attention to Pound's relationship with Arnold Dolmetsch, pioneer in the re-introduction of early instruments - argues that what purports to be a performance style rooted in antiquity is actually an expression of modernist aesthetics – a claim he goes on in this and various other essays to substantiate by examining the ways in which various historical data on performance is disregarded when it does not concur with the objectivist ethos – most notably that concerning embellishment, ornamentation and other manifestations of performer freedom.

The post-war historically-informed performance had hardly got off the ground at the time Adorno wrote his essay; it was an interwar movement and its musicological advocates that he had mind. By the time of Taruskin's important writings on performance, most of which date from between the early 1980s and early 1990s, the movement had developed extensively, especially in Britain and the Netherlands. And Taruskin also linked this movement to the objectivism of earlier figures such as Toscanini and – and this is something which should be borne in mind in light of Taruskin's later fanatically anti-German polemics – he argues somewhat disparagingly that all such figures evince an anti-German bias, specifically in terms of Germanic traditions of high expressiveness as manifested in particular by Wagner but going back at least to Beethoven, and the tradition of the sublime, and continued by such conductors as Karajan, long the *bete noire* of historically-informed performance. For Taruskin the contrast is between a cathedral and a skyscraper on of various

³ Ibid. pp. 140-141.

⁴ Taruskin, 'The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past', pp. 107, 138.

⁵ Adorno, 'Bach Defended Against his Devotees', pp. 142-143.

dualisms he creates through the course of the essays collected in the volume *Text and Act*, variously contrasting the ‘geometric’ with the ‘vitalist’, modernism with romanticism, or even a post-modern ‘reassertion of consumer values’ against ‘the culture of the museum’⁶.

Adorno’s polemic is marred by, amongst other things, his extremely cavalier dismissal of the idea that instrumental timbre was of any consequence during the baroque period, but he is at his most incisive when associating objectivist Bach with ‘the sphere of resentment and obscuritanism, the triumph of the subjectless over subjectivism’⁷. This type of argument is entirely consistent with Adorno’s writings from the same period on the authoritarian personality, one who derives reassurance and repairs ego-weakness by submission to higher impersonalised authority – a phenomenon which was obviously linked to then only recently defeated fascism in music. Adorno’s diagnosis in terms of de-subjectivisation, de-humanisation, and submission to authority (as well as to pseudo-archaisms, idealised views of a mythical past removed from the realm of history as process, whether in the form of imaginary medieval communities, folk music and culture, or an ideal of baroque music and society) link his critiques of objectivist Bach performance, of Stravinsky, and of Wagner, as well of the tendencies towards total rationalisation of the compositional process in early 1950s modernism that Adorno critiqued in his essay ‘The Ageing of the New Music’. To my mind, one of his most brilliant manoeuvres was to reveal similar de-subjectivising processes at play in both Wagner and Stravinsky, two composers previously assumed to represent polar opposites. In both cases the possibilities of self-reflexive subjectivity are supplanted by something more akin to Max Weber’s model of charismatic authority. Both cast themselves in the role of manipulators of their audience, creating a mystical aura around a construction of personality which may not overlap in any way with their own more inwardly-directed consciousness.

If there is an overridingly consistent strain throughout Adorno’s output, it concerns the dissolution of the human subject in the face of total rationalisation of society, a process that occurs under fascism, Stalinism and late capitalism alike, though the precise manifestations take on different forms. Charismatic authority is no less de-subjectivising than anything else, and is at the root of aristocratic identity, which itself requires at least in public an impression of aloofness and mysticism in order to emphasise its own difference from the identities of the non-aristocratic public, and thus legitimate the power it wields. This model can be found in Wagner and Stravinsky, and is not incompatible with objectivism, as Stravinsky demonstrates, though it is possible for seemingly objective forces to wield power without requiring a visible human personality as their representative – communist bureaucracy (which was also capable of functioning without the charismatic leadership of a figure like Stalin) and the impersonal face of capitalist institutions demonstrate that even that last manifestation of something resembling a human being can be erased, and the system can appear to operate purely according to its own logic and momentum, against which human resistance is futile.

⁶ Taruskin, ‘Backslide or Harbinger’, p. 300.

⁷ Adorno, ‘Bach Defended Against his Devotees’, p. 145

Taruskin's diagnosis is not couched in such grandiose historical terms, deriving from Hegel, Marx and psychoanalysis; rather, his narrative reflects the perspective of an American liberal, with all the inner contradictions this entails. And nowhere is the difference more apparent than in the variety of expressive possibility that he contrasts favourably with objectivist tendencies in performance. Adorno sees in such objectivism the antithesis of the form of individualised, unsubservient subjectivity of the early bourgeois era, manifested above all in Beethoven's middle period, which struggles for survival in the face of the rationalising tendencies of late capitalism. It is a subjectivity of the musician as *producer*, one no longer constrained by the demands of feudal servitude – in this sense a radical break with 18th-century *Affektionslehre*, as Carl Dahlhaus points out⁸ – only to find itself confronted with a new form of servitude provided by the encroachments of an ever-more powerful culture industry. In the specific context of performance, the move towards objectivist renditions of Bach reflect a culture and society increasingly distrustful of the advanced subjectivity that Adorno identifies in Bach's music – as practically the only composer before Beethoven in whom he finds radical bourgeois subjectivity foreshadowed. But it is surprising that Adorno does not seem, at least not in any pronounced manner, to extend the virtues of this type of subjectivity to the performer, whom he casts very much in a secondary role relative to the composer. Objectivist performance is suspect not because it disallows the performer the possibility of bringing their own unique individual subjectivity to bear upon the performance, but because it overrides the complex manifestations of subjectivity that are evidenced in the composition itself, through the imposition of strict hierarchies that relegate all the complex, sometimes tortuous, inner logic of the work, as manifested through specific harmonic and contrapuntal procedures, to a purely decorative role, in the name of creating a self-contained musical object whose possible wider implications, social and otherwise, can be absorbed within its own hermetically sealed boundaries.

Taruskin, however, is ultimately no more on the side of individualistic performance, despite certain rather half-baked attempts to suggest that he might be (for example when favouring 'crooked' over 'straight' performances). This, I would argue, is a direct result of his non-Marxist model which instead reflects the ideologies of American consumer capitalism. As mentioned earlier, Taruskin, on repeated occasions, appeals to the supposed wishes, desires and aspirations of the listener as *consumer* of music, and to expression framed in terms of the reactions it invokes in the listener, prioritising these over the subjective wishes of the musical producer whether as composer or performer. This view becomes a recurrent motif in his later work, especially throughout the *Oxford History of Western Music*, ruthlessly interrogating music history, in the name of a questionable appeal to egalitarianism and non-elitism, for those composers in whom he can find evidence of a trait he deplores, that of stubbornly following their own musical desires as opposed to assuming their rightful modest position as servants of listeners. The position Taruskin deplores he associates primarily with the aesthetics of German romanticism – with the type of radical bourgeois subjectivity so highly privileged by Adorno – though he identifies traces of the same phenomenon in wider times and places, as far back as Josquin or even the troubadours, which somewhat undermines what I would identify as his strategy to isolate Germany as the source of all that is bad in music – with this in mind

⁸ Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*.

I would suggest that the *Oxford History* could be retitled ‘Germanism in Music’, with all that such a Wagnerian allusion entails.

So Taruskin’s antithesis to objectivist tendencies in performance return to the aesthetics of *Affektionslehre*, to pre-Beethovenian subjectivity reinvented according to the demands of the culture industry whose very nature he never seriously questions, in common with other New Musicologists whose hostility to established non-commercial musical institutions leaves them in the unenviable position of becoming advocates for market-driven musical production. As a critique of objectivist performance, though, he is forced to appeal to a presumption of what listeners as consumers supposedly want, rather arrogantly assuming the mantle of their spokesperson. But, as John Butt has pointed out in his book *Playing with History*, Taruskin’s consumerist claims are fundamentally undermined simply by the very commercial success of the historically-informed performance movement – as Butt puts it, someone must have bought all of those recordings of Christopher Hogwood⁹.

But Taruskin elsewhere makes the claim that ‘virtually all important artistic movements since Romanticism (including, of course, our authenticity movement) have shared in this contempt for the public as arbiter of taste, whatever their differences may otherwise have been’¹⁰, thus claiming a significant commonality between the variety of modernist objectivism he identifies and Beethovenian subjectivity, once more casting himself in the role of spokesperson for the public as consumers. The conclusions he draws from this claim, in terms of the ills of a form of music based upon the wishes of producers rather than consumers, are flawed on several counts, principally because of the model of consumer behaviour upon which it is predicated. Taruskin seems to have bought into the model of production being principally driven by and responding to demand – almost like the idea of the marketplace as a democracy – rather than supply and the *creation* of a demand, a model that I believe even most right-wing economists would not deny, notwithstanding the propaganda disseminated by their political representatives.

Taruskin prefers assertive, even bullying, rhetoric to a throughgoing exploration of the implications of his positions such as, I believe, would reveal their own internal contradictions. But his writings on the subject remain of great importance, not least because of their faultlines which help to suggest other possible conclusions. Taruskin’s consumerist model, for the reasons I have described, is powerless to offer an alternative other than if one can believe in a listening community all made up of replica Taruskins- perhaps not the most edifying of visions. Otherwise he would need to fall back on some notion of false consumer consciousness in order to explain the success of objectivist performance. To do so would utterly undermine his own populism. But this is not a problem for the thoroughly non-populist Adorno. He is well aware as anyone of the complicity with and submission towards the ideologies of capitalism and other authoritarian systems as anyone. And this thinking permeates his 1958 essay on Toscanini, ‘The Mastery of the Maestro’, which forms a continuum with his observations about consumer and audience behaviour as he identified above all in the United States. Crucially, he sees the rise of the figure of Toscanini as having its roots in a ‘recoil against the great personality’ together with ‘the first signs of an

⁹ John Butt, *Playing with History*, p. 19.

¹⁰ Taruskin, ‘The Limits of Authenticity’, pp. 72-73.

allergic reaction to expressiveness as such'¹¹, only to result in a reconstitution of the cult of personality, seemingly only existing for its own sake – 'People believe in Toscanini so as to have something to believe in'¹², rather like the grotesque phenomenon in today's celebrity culture where some people are famous simply for being famous. Toscanini, to Adorno, created a streamlined type of performance, akin to the style found in circles around Stravinsky and the young Hindemith, one 'based on machinelike impassivity and hostility to expression'¹³ in which all the inner tensions within the music are practically erased. This form of performance, entailing an 'atomization into merely sensuous details', which may be joined together, but never form themselves into some totality, Adorno associates with 'the kind of atomistic listening associated more readily with the Culture Industry'¹⁴. And it is clear here and elsewhere that he has little respect for audiences who respond positively to such forms of music-making. The Toscanini that Adorno paints is of a similar breed to the objectivists who enact the historicist performances of Bach. Whether or not these win over audiences is not the issue for Adorno (though it should not be so surprising that one who was so acutely aware of the potential that fascism had for generating at least a measurable degree of popular support should thus be sceptical of populist arguments); rather it is the very untruth of the music itself, and its entering into an uncritical relationship with the most regressive tendencies of contemporary society.

Minus these last aspects, Adorno's critique of objectivism is very much at one with Taruskin's writings on the work of Christopher Hogwood, Roger Norrington, and other primarily British protagonists in the historically-informed performance movement. But he is more circumspect in his comments on the work of Nicolaus Harnoncourt, Gustav Leonhardt, Reinhard Goebel and others from continental Europe, as I believe would have been Adorno had he lived to hear the bulk of their mature work. And this is where I believe Taruskin's critique misses its focus: what he identifies as a characteristic of so-called 'authenticist' performance is really something more deeply rooted within performance traditions in Britain, a country which, despite leading the world in industrialisation and democratic institutions, never really had a proper bourgeois revolution such as would bring about a palpable shift from feudal to bourgeois subjectivity. One need only listen to recordings from the likes of Raymond Leppard and Sir Neville Marriner from the 1960s, and compare them with those of their period instrument-oriented compatriots from right afterwards, to discern how deep the similarities are. And whilst contemporary European HIP can similarly be shown to manifest a continuity with 1920s neo-classicism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*, there still remained in much of Europe other traditions of performance not explicitly at cross-purposes with late romantic traditions, which was not really the case in Britain to the same extent. Even the opposition between a Colin Davis and a John Eliot Gardiner does not have quite the same cultural and political significance as that between a Herbert von Karajan and a Nicolaus Harnoncourt.

And it is in various of these European HIP figures that I believe one can find a more dialectical relationship with objectivist performing traditions. It is in this context I wish to suggest that there may be some possibilities of reconciliation between the

¹¹ Adorno, 'The Mastery of the Maestro'

¹² Ibid. p. 43.

¹³ Ibid. p. 41.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 47.

aesthetic ideals of performance of Adorno and those of, for example, Harnoncourt. This is where I will finally turn to Adorno's thoughts expressed in TTMR.

Adorno makes clear the purpose of his study, saying that:

It is directed against 2 fronts. On the one hand official musical life, which – as is particularly evident in its most celebrated exponents – became part of the culture industry long ago: galvanized, spirited and culinary, all *at the same time*. Cultivated and barbaric music-making converge. On the other hand the front of abstract negation, the escape to the mensural realm. In the former case a false subjectivism, in the latter the residual theory of truth, the extermination of the subject (*all* forms of objectivism, from Stockhausen to Walcha, really amount to the same thing. . .

Whilst Adorno makes it clear that he is opposed to the approaches of *both* Furtwängler and Toscanini, the very emphasis of the study shows a clear bias in favour of critique of the latter and all the associated objectivist tendencies, variously encountered in the work of Bruno Walter, and in certain ways Alfred Cortot and Arthur Schnabel. But the very seriousness with which he engages in a detailed reading of Frederick Dorian's *The History of Music in Performance* demonstrates that the study of historical *Aufführungspraxis* is not a field which he would dismiss out of hand.

Elsewhere Adorno alludes to the importance of the interpreter being able to break with their acquired habituality (which is nonetheless viewed as a necessary precondition for any interpretation) so that it can be 'negated, and sublated by the specific insights arising from each work' – with this in mind, he criticises Schnabel for not getting beyond the negation stage. The insistence on an active engagement with the specificity of individual works is a logical extension of his disdain for performing traditions that enact the very opposite by rendering individual works as relatively anonymous examples of genres – hence 'They say Bach and mean Telemann'. This comment is notoriously unfair to Telemann, but if one substitutes the phrase 'minor composers of generic baroque music' for 'Telemann', then Adorno's argument seems fair.

What Adorno does not do in this incomplete study, but which I believe offers the potential for much fruitful future investigation, is attempt to integrate his readings of source texts on performance with these concerns. And this is where I would like to suggest a possibility that is not really considered in TTMR, but is not excluded either: *that the very study of historical performance practice and its implementation can facilitate a framework for interpretation within which the identity of the specific insights of a work is made all the more pronounced*. This would be an extension to the realm of performance of Adorno's identification of the particular radicalism of those of Bach's works inhabiting archaic idioms. And I would also link this argument to the convictions of Walter Benjamin on German Tragic Drama – by situating the theatrical works in their historical context, their dialectical relationship with that very historical and social structure is what enables them to project outwards into the present day. Benjamin was thinking primarily in terms of interpretation, but there is no reason why this argument cannot equally apply to performance and theatrical convention.

Harnoncourt, in his writings on music, comes from a different angle, one which is drawn inexorably to pre-bourgeois music – specifically that preceding the French

Revolution – but his diagnosis of the ills of the musical culture that has grown up in post-1789 times makes for an interesting comparison.

[N]ow that it [music] is regarded as an ornament, it is felt that music should first and foremost be “beautiful.” Under no circumstances should it be allowed to disturb or startle us.

Harnoncourt’s critique of the very nature of certain forms of cultivation of older music is directed against the same processes that Adorno would see as having been engendered by the Culture Industry:

As I see it, this interest in old music – by which I mean music not written by our generation – could only occur as the result of a series of glaring misunderstandings. Thus we are able to use only “beautiful” music, which the present is unable to offer us. There has never been a kind of music that was merely “beautiful.” While “beauty” is a component of every type of music, we can make it into a determining factor only by disregarding all of music’s other components. Only since we have ceased to understand music as a whole, and perhaps no longer want to be able to understand it, has it been possible for us to reduce music to its beautiful aspect alone, to iron out all of its wrinkles.

In an essay on Mozart’s orchestras, Harnoncourt draws attention the criticisms voiced by Hans Georg Nägeli of Mozart’s music, the apparent excessive love of contrast, Mozart being ‘both shepherd and warrior, sycophant and hothead . . . soft melodies frequently alternate with sharply cutting tonal interplay, grace of movement with impetuosity. Great was his genius, but also great [were] his genial errors of creating effects through contrast’, and the music being ‘unartistic . . . when something can be made effective only through its opposite’. Harnoncourt in essence agrees with the attributes identified in Mozart by Nägeli, but the very things Nägeli saw as flaws Harnoncourt perceives as the strengths of the music. And it is the move away from a form of performance practice predicated upon the clear articulation of stark hierarchies that enables performers to make the music merely ‘beautiful’, or what Adorno would call ‘culinary’. Harnoncourt says that the tonal language of Mozart ‘has been flattened, smoothed out, sweetened and harmonized in a way that cannot be explained on the basis of Mozart’s scores’, that we now have ‘a soft, full, dark string sound, with an admixture of the greatest possible number of dark-timbred wind instruments. The dynamics are undulating and not graduated; clarity and transparency are sacrificed to this sound and these dynamics’. The very attributes of the music thus being erased are part of Harnoncourt’s ‘specific insights’ – in this case focused upon articulation, timbre, dynamic gradations and other factors as much as harmony and counterpoint (of which Harnoncourt is no less aware but perhaps feels their importance to be more self-evident and less in need of verbal articulation), but no less specific to the works as a result. And what I hear in the best of Harnoncourt’s performances, of Bach, Mozart and others, is a type of rendition that stands at the opposite end of a spectrum from the clean-cut ‘objectivist’ style. Harnoncourt employs the continuous dialectical contrasts between material, and the tension created between the implications of individuated material and the sometimes rigid hierarchies within the structures and genres they inhabit, in the service of a vision, often dark, always dramatic, and far from leading to a tidy resolution of all tensions and erasure of experience by a work’s conclusion, that seems to find a way forward that sublates the Furtwängler-Toscanini opposition. It is also a very long way from, say, Norrington’s performances of Beethoven Symphonies criticised by Taruskin for reducing the Ninth in particular to nothing more than a ‘pack of notes’, shying away from the expressive potency of the work in favour of reinventing it as a variety of

pure formalism. Taruskin contrasts this with an essentially Wagnerian view of Beethoven, whilst Adorno, and Harnoncourt, seem to reject *both* of these.

This is just one example of a way in which a historically-informed approach might, in my view, be reconcilable with the rejection of earlier reified norms of performance as identified with Adorno – one which is, as Adorno puts it, ‘Against Furtwängler and Walter – *and* against Toscanini! And Karajan.’¹⁵. It is by no means the only way – Leonhardt’s forms of intensity generated as a precise result of austere aloofness, creating a sense of latency in a music that is forever contained within boundaries but yearning to escape them, or Reinhard Goebel’s exploration of the dialectic between aristocratic baroque genres inhabited by a more rustic, folk-like (though tremendously technically accomplished), style of playing, almost translating a form of class conflict into musical terms, would be others. And whilst demonstrating a degree of British reserve compared, say, to Harnoncourt, some of John Eliot Gardiner’s renditions of Bach, Beethoven and especially Schumann and Berlioz are of a quite different category to the culinary renditions produced Hogwood, Norrington, Pinnock and others inhabiting the British middlebrow musical establishment.

Adorno’s specific insights into performance, some of them subtle and penetrating, provide a new and much-needed impetus for a developing discourse around performance that has become somewhat stagnant in recent years. Whilst not without their own serious problems – not least because of their insufficiently theorised conceptions of the role of the performer’s subjectivity, and a blindness to the possibilities inherent in employing objectivist modes of performance as one element amongst others in the course of a wider dialectic – they should not be seen as merely a hearkening back to some nostalgic realm of older High German cultural practice, nor as a kneejerk reaction against the multifarious world of historically-informed performance that has developed in particular since 1945. To bring his ideas into a dialogue with other thinkers on the subject of performance, and find ways of translating these ideas into actual performances themselves, can be an immensely fruitful way forward.

¹⁵ Adorno, TTMR, p. 145.