

## Music in the Background

In our immediate life there is no longer a place for music. Anyone who, by himself, wanted to sing out loud in the street would run the risk of being arrested as a disturber of the peace. If you hum under your breath, abstracted from external things, you may run into a car at any moment. And don't the three boy scouts [*Wandervögel*]<sup>1</sup> look sad and stiff as they take their place in the market square and sing along with their out-of-tune guitar chords, as if they were wandering minstrels—these secondary school students. Only political action can possibly unleash the physical reality of song for a few brief hours. We are far from Naples, not only in space, but in time. If, there, all speech still soars toward song; if the fruit seller, bearing his wares on a heathen altar-cart, offers up hymns before it; here at home the street vendors have long since become ambulant posters. If you are looking for music, you have to step outside the space of immediate life, because it no longer is one, and find the lost immediacy where it costs the price of admission, at the opera, at a concert.

All the same, it has not been entirely eliminated. Certainly, the organ-grinder and the backyard musician are archaic vestiges. They have their own law and their own history, at cross-purposes with society, and their obscure existence counts for nothing in its eyes. The islands of house music are located rather close to the shimmering frozen lake of self-conscious artistic practice. But exiled Music herself, pushed to the edge of existence, holds out loyally there: music as background.

It is, after the death of the silent film and its consoler, the movie-house orchestra, the music of the cafés or, in the ritualistically preferred language of today, the establishments with live entertainment. It has survived the radios, even without outside assistance; cafés and pubs with their own band always draw a bigger crowd than those with nothing but a loudspeaker. It

costs the listener nothing; it is included in the price of the coffee, the hot chocolate, the vermouth; he barely notices it. If he does notice it, he feels himself buoyed up as a visitor to an expensive establishment. Music belongs; it may have been shooed off the street, but not to the distant reaches of formalized art. Rather, it keeps the customers company—the tired ones with their stimulating drink, the busy ones at their negotiations, even the newspaper readers; even the flirts, if there still are any.

The first characteristic of background music is that you don't have to listen to it. No stillness surrounds it with an insulating layer. It seeps into the murmur of the conversations. If an unfortunate tenor bellows out his Italian canzonettas, we experience him as intrusive. The silence lasts only the couple of seconds until the next order is taken. Art connoisseurs who go "Shhh!"—here they are implacably exposed as comical.

In *piano* passages the music wants to disappear altogether. Then you can hear the clatter of spoons and cups, mingled with the glockenspiel, maybe the high notes of the piano; the phrases of the cello fall away, lost. In *forte* passages, the music climbs like a rocket. Its arcs glisten over the listeners until they sit there, abandoned once more, in the gray of their cigarette puffs. They are not an audience. Scarcely ever will one of them comment on the quality of the music that is offered. Nor are they in a musical mood. The music scarcely touches their inner stirrings. Rather: it is an objective event among, above them. The coldness from table to table; the strangeness between the young gentleman and the unknown girl across from him, who waits for the looks that will give her permission to be offended. All this is not, for the life of you, eliminated by the music, but instead caught up and bound together. The gentleman will certainly not dare to accost the girl here, in the expensive establishment with live entertainment. But coldness, desire, the strangeness of the closeness between the two—the music transports it with an abrupt gesture into the stars, like the name of Ariadne abandoned.<sup>2</sup> The accosted girls themselves do not need to pay attention to it. As soon as it gets too loud, they remove their bodies from the astral event with the cry: Waiter! The bill! And strike the glass with their spoon. This, however, is simultaneously the sound of café music.

Has anyone ever listened carefully to this sound? Connoisseurs know how to differentiate between a Parisian-style band, a salon band, and certain others. The differences are of a rather subtle kind. The sound is common to all—Hindemith created his worthy monument to it in the first Donaueschingen chamber works.<sup>3</sup> One cannot speak of an orchestra; the endlessness of the string choir, the colors of the wind instruments, the

resonance of the brass are lacking. Ergo, chamber music, one thinks, and at once becomes aware of the impossibility. Here is no intertwining play of instruments entering by turns. There is only a melody of the uppermost voice—the soloist presents himself as a “wandering fiddler [*Stehgeiger*].” The piano is not employed like a piano in chamber music; it is the “conductor,” with foundation and harmony, perhaps the last heir in European music to the figured bass. This gaudy sound has something splendidly shabby about it. It is as bright as tinsel; but it tears in your hand. It wants to represent orchestras and yet is dominated by the piano; there is scarcely any place where the demand that things should be “appropriate to the material” is so heedlessly rendered ridiculous as here. Like the *Stephanie Gavotte*,<sup>4</sup> it pretends to chamber-musical refinements—but in the end it only means “wandering fiddler,” for the pizzicati get lost. 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 changes. It is brighter, sharper, more clearly defined. When café music falls silent, it sounds as if a miserly waiter is turning off a couple of electric bulbs. Background music is an acoustic light source.

For what is non-genuine, appearance-like about it, the designated technical term is “arrangement.” No original compositions are played, no piece as it is conceived. Everything is in arrangements for the salon orchestra, which falsifies and alters it. It softens grandly 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 once again. Not, it is true, they themselves, in their structured form. But the ruins of their sound have been joined together in a second, strangely transparent form. The piano does not simply replace the missing horns; the previous fullness has itself become shabby and is therefore passed on to the piano. The first fiddler does not make the noble melody ordinary with his soloistic intrusiveness; it has already lost its noble character and therefore abandons itself to the fiddler. The truly noble melody will shine like a star against the background: one hears it as music.

For the rest, however, the café arranges bouquets of dead flowers. 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. If our art music lingers in the comforting realm of Orpheus—here its echo sounds from Euridice's mournful region. Its glow is netherworldly. It can remain unnoticed because it is unreal. But it is not a black shadow, rather a bright one, like milk glass. One can, as it were, hear vaguely through this music, through to the next room. This is why it shines.

One would think that music in the background, unnoticed music, should not present itself other than as accompaniment—as good ballet music, in contrast to pantomimes, creates a complement of rhythms, colors, sounds and saves the music for the dance up on the stage. Far from true. Since in the café, after all, the melodies wander around as ghosts, one need not fear any disturbance from them, no matter how present they are. For they are quoted from the unconscious memory of the listeners, not introduced to them. The greater the ecstasies, the more perfect the emotional calm of the hearers over whose heads they drift. There are masters—truly masters—whose greatness first becomes entirely evident in this odd transformation of passionate appearance into the cold comfort of reality. Puccini is the most prominent among them. One could think that *Bohème*, *Butterfly*, *Tosca* were created with the thought of imaginary potpourris that do not emerge until the last tear from the operatic catastrophes has dried up. But Grieg, too, is not to be sneezed at, with pieces like "To Spring." Tchaikovsky is suitable; naturally Mignon and Margarete. Carmen defies all ghostly doings. Faced with Schubert, café music becomes blasphemous. Strange that the new dances don't want to fit in, either. Their function is too fresh for them to allow themselves to be used as background yet. The best are the melodies with the great unbroken arcs, like the arias of *Butterfly* and *Rodolfo*.<sup>5</sup> Anyone who, moved, is startled out of his conversation or thoughts after all, and who looks in that direction, is transformed into Georg Heym's suburban dwarf: "he looks up to the great green bell of heaven, where silent meteors cross far away."<sup>6</sup>

(c. 1934; GS, vol. 18, pp. 819–23)  
Translated by Susan H. Gillespie

## NOTES BY RICHARD LEPPERT

1. *Wandervogel* was a scout-like organization founded around 1895; its name was changed in 1901 to "Wandervogel Committee for Schoolboy Excursions." After 1933 the organization was merged with the Hitler Jugend. Though the Wandervogel Leagues were officially dissolved by the Nazi regime, individual groups in some instances remained in contact with their members and served as nuclei for opposition to the Third Reich. "Wandervogel," in *The Encyclopedia of the Third Reich*, ed. Christian Zentner and Friedemann Bedürftig, trans. Amy Hackett (New York: Macmillan, 2001), vol. 2, pp. 1017–18.
2. Ariadne was abandoned by Theseus, whom she loved, on the island of Naxos, after she had helped him escape the labyrinth following his successful slaying of the feared Minotaur. Ariadne was eventually rescued by Bacchus. From Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 8:169–82.
3. The Donaueschingen Festival was one of the most important all-new-music festivals of the twentieth century, and perhaps the longest-lived, though it has gone through a number of transformations. Hindemith, who served as a principal administrator of the festival between 1923 and 1926, very successfully premiered a number of his chamber works there, including works as stylistically different as the Second String Quartet (1921) and the Kammermusik No. 1 (1922). Adorno's wry reference is almost certainly to this latter work, whose finale includes quotations from a foxtrot written by the cabaret composer Wilm-Wilm, and ends with a siren; the work's twelve instruments include accordion, trumpet, and percussion. Adorno may also have in mind the jazzy solo piece 1922 — *Suite for Piano*, op. 26, with movements marked: march, shimmy, nocturne, Boston, and ragtime. See also p. 133 n. 2.
4. See p. 316 n. 7.
5. Adorno names the principal female roles, and one principal male role, from several standard repertory romantic operas, all of which were supplied by their composers with arias lending themselves to transformation into café music; these include Mignon from Ambroise Thomas's opera of the same name, Margarete from Gounod's *Faust*, and Rodolfo from Puccini's *La Bohème*. The sort of music that Adorno has in mind was often recorded, sans vocal parts—the melodic lines being relocated, where necessary, to the first violins—and mass marketed as "opera without words" in the 1950s and '60s. Indeed, the orchestral arrangements of this sort tended to be overstocked with strings: the recording orchestras led by André Kostelanetz and Mantovani were among the more prominent, together with 101 Strings.
6. Georg Heym (1887–1912), German expressionist poet. The lines Adorno cites are the last two from his eleven-stanza poem "Die Vorstadt" [The Suburb]. Georg Heym, *Gesammelte Gedichte*, ed. Carl Seelig (Zürich: Verlag der Arche, 1947), pp. 8–9.

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COMPOSITION, COMPOSERS,  
AND WORKS



*essays on*  
**MUSIC**

SELECTED, WITH INTRODUCTION,

COMMENTARY, AND NOTES BY

*richard leppert*

NEW TRANSLATIONS BY

SUSAN H. GILLESPIE

*theodor w.*  
**ADORNO**