

Rethinking the Sociology of Music After Adorno: A Review

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Abstract. Tia DeNora, a British sociologist of music, proposes the concept of "musical event" in her work *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*, which promotes the transformation of the sociology of music from a grand theoretical research paradigm to a practice-oriented one. Taking this monograph as the core material, this paper adopts the methods of literature analysis and theoretical comparison to sort out DeNora's inheritance and reflection on Adorno's theory, focusing on her redefinition of cognition, emotion, control, and the theoretical significance of the "musical event" framework for understanding the sociality of music. The study points out that DeNora breaks through the problems of Adorno's high abstraction and absence of actors, enabling the social significance of music to be reinterpreted in specific contexts and interaction processes. The paper further summarizes the theoretical contributions and methodological limitations of the book, arguing that the "musical event" provides a more explanatory practical perspective for contemporary sociology of music, and also indicates the path for deepening the relationship between context, actors, and structure in future research.

Keywords: Adorno, DeNora, *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*, musical event, sociology of music

1. Introduction

Since the early 20th century, starting with Theodor W. Adorno, the sociology of music has seemed to become the only credible way to explain musical meaning besides traditional musical text analysis. Adorno imposed decisive conditions on the criteria for musical evaluation, using a single standard to judge all music. He placed music within a high-level critique of capitalist modernity, emphasizing the deep connection between music and social structure, and proposed that only music that reflects social reality and exposes social truth is progressive and good. From this perspective, music becomes a carrier for revealing social alienation and the culture industry, thus possessing a clear ideological critical function. Since the late 20th century, music has no longer been merely a "work" but has become a social event embedded in emotional regulation, spatial organization, relational interaction, and identity construction. This change has made Adorno's macro-critical framework no longer sufficient to explain reality.

In her representative work *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*, the British sociologist of music Tia DeNora puts forward the concept of "musical event" [1]. She regards music as a feature of the social environment and examines how music is evoked, mobilized, and interacted with by people

in the social environment. This research marks the transformation of the sociology of music from a theoretical paradigm to a practical paradigm. The author attempts to sort out and summarize the monograph *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*, extract and compare the research ideas adopted by music sociologists after Adorno from the perspective of ways of thinking about music, and then conduct reflections.

2. Adorno: music as a form of social criticism

Adorno clearly pointed out in *Aesthetic Theory* that "art is the opposite of society" [2]. Its truth lies not in the reproduction of reality, but in revealing the internal contradictions of society and maintaining a critical distance from the existing social order. For Adorno, music is critical precisely because it can embody a negative response to social logic in its internal form, presenting the rifts of modern society through techniques such as "dissonance", "instability", and "non-resolution". For example, Schoenberg's atonal compositions resist the homogenizing logic in the capitalist cultural context through their fragmented composition, while avant-garde music completes the dismantling of ideology by disrupting traditional auditory expectations. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno further reveals the false experience produced by the "culture industry" [3]: modern people think they are freely choosing cultural products, but in fact, they passively accept the emotional templates provided by capital. The standardized structure of consumer music shapes listeners' compliant psychological habits at the sensory level, making them unconsciously accept the existing social order. Therefore, Adorno points out that listeners' choices are often preset; listeners are not choosing, but being chosen.

In the book *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*, DeNora first affirms the unique contributions of Adorno's theory. She points out that Adorno did not attempt to explain the social role of music in the traditional sociological sense, but placed music deep within consciousness, emotion, and cultural structure, exploring its position in spiritual life and social existence. He broke through the binary opposition of "music-society" and understood music as a form of cognition that reveals the predicament of modern subjects, which undoubtedly provided important theoretical resources for the sociology of music. However, DeNora also points out the obvious limitations of Adorno's theory. Firstly, Adorno's discussions are overly abstract; although he focuses on realistic philosophical issues, his textual development lacks an empirical foundation, often overriding specific practices with grand categories. Secondly, he pays insufficient attention to the initiative of musical actors, with listeners mainly regarded as passive recipients in his framework. Thirdly, his emphasis on the critical nature of music sometimes goes to extremes, to the extent that he simply equates aesthetic value with social authenticity, as he puts it: "Without social authenticity, music has no aesthetic value whatsoever." [4]

Fundamentally speaking, these methodological flaws are the root cause of the deviation in Adorno's theory. He mistakenly took viewpoints as methods and regarded the critical method of social totality as the only method—i.e., "method as system"—which inevitably made his research process tendentious and ultimately led to certain erroneous and even extreme results. As Adorno emphasized in *Negative Dialectics*, concepts cannot fully encompass the objects themselves, and things will always leave a "residue" beyond concepts [5]. Despite realizing the limitations of concepts, Adorno still obscured the practical interaction of music in specific contexts with macro categories in his own discussions, making music overly regarded as an abstract expression of social structure. In DeNora's interpretation, Adorno was not wrong about the problems, but about the methods. Therefore, she attempts to respond to those still inspiring issues raised by Adorno by introducing new methodologies: shifting from highly abstract critical philosophy to focusing on

musical practices, interaction processes, and experience itself, and further asking: Where do we go after Adorno?

3. DeNora: where do we go after Adorno

3.1. New methods, old concerns

DeNora first puts forward the theoretical proposition that the sociology of art should "return to Adorno", but the so-called "return" mainly refers to returning to the topics he concerned about. The core connotation of DeNora's theory is "new methods, old concerns", and based on this idea, she reconstructs Adorno's thoughts from three aspects: cognition, emotion, and control.

3.1.1. Music and cognition

DeNora acknowledges that Adorno's insights into the relationship between music and ideology are still inspiring. Adorno once focused on how the works of composers such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky embody specific "styles of consciousness" [1], and believed that music can intervene in the subject's perceptual mode through its formal structure, and even shape the ideological structure of modern subjects. DeNora retains this "old concern" but proposes that this theme needs to be reconstructed with new methodologies.

In her view, the role of music in cognition is not achieved through "reflecting social consciousness", but through providing "cognitive resources" that can be mobilized by actors [6]. With its rhythm, layers, voices, and structure, music provides actors with a "format of understanding", enabling them to organize perception, interpret the environment, or reshape self-cognition with the help of music. Music is not a symbolic presentation of ideology, but a practical tool used by actors to construct meaning in daily life. In *Music in Everyday Life*, DeNora provides an example with Lucy's case. Lucy prefers bass and alto voices and finds her personality traits—such as reluctance to stand out and preference for a low-key self-positioning—in the "inner voices" of certain musical passages. This indicates that musical structure provides actors with a certain "template for self-understanding", enabling them to identify, name, and stabilize their own traits in music. Lucy formed a cognitive form of herself based on musical structure, thus making music a medium for knowledge production [6]. From this perspective, DeNora not only retains Adorno's key question about music and consciousness but also replaces the grand narrative of ideological criticism with "music as resource".

3.1.2. Music and emotion

DeNora affirms that Adorno is one of the few music sociologists who pay attention to emotional responses to music. However, she criticizes him for placing emotional listening within a stratified typology, corresponding different social classes, musical styles, and specific emotional response patterns through "types of musical comportment" [1]. This typological framework presupposes the listener's social position, listening context, and emotional outcomes, making emotional responses regarded as products directly isomorphic with social structure. Therefore, Adorno could hardly explain the differences and variability of emotions in actual listening, and even ignored the complexity of the interactive relationship between music and actors.

In contrast, DeNora advocates shifting the research focus from static classification to the process of how emotions are "accomplished" in musical events. She believes that emotion is not an inherent attribute of music itself, but is gradually generated in the interaction between the subject and musical

structure, physical state, spatial atmosphere, and social context. In this process, music provides an "affordance"—i.e., the structural conditions that actors can mobilize in specific situations to construct, regulate, or stabilize their emotional states [6]. Therefore, to understand the emotional function of music, we need to focus on how emotions are activated, strengthened, reconfigured, or stabilized in the listening process, rather than presupposing a causal chain between music and emotion. DeNora emphasizes that we must abandon the binary framework between music and consumers and regard emotion as a dynamic practice that constantly changes in musical events.

3.1.3. Music and control

Adorno criticized the standardization of music in the culture industry. In his view, highly stylized musical forms will construct an expected perceptual framework, making the audience's response patterns tend to be consistent, thereby rejecting variability and maintaining the existing social order unconsciously. On the contrary, "good" music can inspire us to reflect on the social order and provide motivation for change. In this sense, music becomes a condition that influences listeners' perceptions and responses in an almost deterministic way.

The author believes that this will lead to two unsatisfactory forms of determinism: either describing the power of music as completely determined by its social uses; or conversely, holding that music completely determines social behavior. Music does not inherently carry the power to control subjects; instead, in specific contexts, through its formal characteristics such as structure, rhythm, and harmony, it provides possibilities for listeners to evoke aesthetic activities [1]. Therefore, the controlling power of music is essentially a relational effect practiced in the interaction between the subject, music, and context. DeNora's perspective liberates "control" from determinism and provides an analytical foundation for subsequent research on "musical events".

3.2. Musical event

DeNora points out that understanding the social function of music cannot be limited to the interpretation of musical texts; it must start from the practice of music being "actually used" in daily life. Rather than asking what music "can do", it is more important to discuss what music "provides for actors" in specific situations. In other words, the social content of music is not preset in the work, but is constantly generated on-site through the interaction between the subject and music.

Based on this reflection, she proposes a new analytical path, namely the "musical event". This method places music in a specific social context and regards it as a continuous interactive process generated among listeners, works, and the environment. From a temporal perspective, a musical event is unfolding, including the preparatory state and expectations before the event occurs, the physical movements, emotional changes, and situational interactions during actual participation, as well as the lasting effects on cognition, emotion, or behavior after the event ends.

In this framework, a "musical event" is understood as a relational structure composed of multiple elements: the whole formed by the interaction C between actor A (such as composers, performers, listeners, analysts) and musical text B in a specific material environment E and social context D [1]. The effectiveness of music can neither be reduced to the inherent attributes of the work itself nor to the subjective intentions of the subject; it is a dynamically generated effect of the relationship between the subject, music, and the environment in specific contexts. By emphasizing eventfulness, DeNora breaks through the binary opposition between subjectivism and objectivism in musical analysis, avoids the limitations of social determinism and aesthetic essentialism, and enables music to be understood as a practice that constantly generates meaning through interaction.

In the "post-stage" of a musical event, the effects of musical experience are manifested. When actors show different emotional tones, attention orientations, or behavioral logics after the event compared with before, music demonstrates its initiative in promoting the transformation of the subject in the context. It can be seen that the social role of music is not given or determined, but is "accomplished" through specific practices.

4. Review: theoretical contributions and limitations

After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology mainly focuses on inheriting and transcending Adorno, promoting the paradigm shift of the sociology of music from grand theory to contextualized practical research. Its primary contribution lies in successfully combining Adorno's critical problem consciousness with the research methods of empirical sociology, avoiding the limitations of excessive abstraction and neglect of actor initiative in Adorno's theory, and establishing the understanding of "the sociality of music" on an observable and experiential basis. The social significance of music does not pre-exist in the form of structure or ideology, but is constantly generated through the interactive relationship between the subject, music, and the environment in specific contexts. This perspective transforms "music as society" from determinism to pragmatism, which is the most innovative theoretical contribution of this book.

The monograph also provides important methodological enlightenment for readers. Instead of returning to Adorno's highly philosophical argumentative path, DeNora absorbs the tradition of empirical sociology from scholars such as Becker and Peterson. The "musical event" framework she proposes provides the sociology of music with an analytical tool that can simultaneously handle micro-interactions, contextual embedding, and meaning generation. This framework transcends the scope of textual discussion and emphasizes that musical materials provide different resources for different actors at different times and in different fields, which is precisely where empirical methods in the sociology of music can be applied. The author attempts to elevate the argument to a level where social life can be described in less general and more socially located terms. This process-oriented, interactive, and contextual research path moves musical research towards a more refined and realistic perspective, and also highlights the initiative of music as a medium of social practice. The author believes that this is a theoretical progress in the sociology of music, a progress towards concreteness consistent with Adorno's own rational criticism.

However, the book also has certain limitations. Since its main discussion focuses on responding to Adorno, the framework construction of the book relies on the path of "dialogue with Adorno", thus showing insufficient integration across traditions. For example, compared with the perspectives on musical sociality proposed by ethnomusicology, body and performance studies, and cognitive musicology, DeNora's discussion involves less, which limits the applicability of her theory in a wider range of research fields. Secondly, although the "musical event" theory emphasizes context and actor initiative, it discusses less how institutional structures, political and economic backgrounds, or technical media shape the generative conditions of musical events, making it still insufficient in explaining more macro musical social mechanisms. Finally, DeNora pays close attention to micro-interactions but rarely touches on the path through which micro-processes accumulate into macro-cultural formation, which means that the "musical event" as a social theory still has room for further expansion.

Overall, the value of After Adorno far outweighs its limitations. It not only deepens the academic understanding of "the sociality of music" but also promotes the paradigm shift from structural criticism to practical generation, providing new theoretical resources and methodological paths for future research. As a connecting work, it not only responds to Adorno's theoretical legacy but also

opens up an interdisciplinary direction for musical research, which is of great significance for understanding the relationship between contemporary music and society.

5. Conclusion

Since Adorno's death, the field of social music has undergone many expansions. For example, the output of cultural or art world approaches within sociology, semiotics and musical discourse analysis within musicology, the focus on music-making as activity within ethnomusicology, and research in the sociology and social psychology of music. Academic circles have continuously broken through the "music-society" dichotomy to pay attention to the operation of music in actual social life.

In this academic context, *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* has a connecting significance. DeNora inherits Adorno's profound problem consciousness about the sociality of music but breaks away from the limitations of his theoretical abstraction. Through the "musical event" framework, she places music into the specific practices of actors, providing us with a more comprehensive way of understanding music. It makes us realize that to understand music, we must ultimately return to the specific scenes where music and actors co-generate the world. It also shows us that after Adorno, musicology and sociology have transcended the traditional boundaries between disciplines and turned to a closer integration, thus forming a new type of interdisciplinary research topic.

However, as demonstrated in this paper, the development of the sociology of music is still ongoing: in different cultural and social contexts, what attitude should we adopt towards music? Is there a need for multi-dimensional attention at the social and aesthetic levels? When we no longer face musical works, what do we face? How do musical events coexist or interact with musical works in the traditional sense? When research is no longer centered on works, how should we redefine the object of music? What kind of object is called a musical event? Does a musical event include musical works or exclude them? Is there a commonality between the two, or is there a huge gap? These questions remind us that while the sociology of music is shifting from structure to practice, it also needs to reflect on its own theoretical boundaries and research methods.

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