17 Adorno and the Prohibition of the Image
The Case of Music

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There are at least two reasons why a discussion of Adorno’s grappling with the prohibition of the image, the Bilderverbot, in the context of music is worthwhile. First, it is well suited to help complicate and enrich the very notion of the prohibition of the image, and touches directly on the question of what might (still) be specifically Jewish about it. The second reason, though one that will do little to convince those who consider Critical Theory a dead end anyway, is that Adorno’s grappling with music, far from being a mere side show, was absolutely central to the evolution of the entire project of Critical Theory.1 Indeed, music emerges from this project as the most likely site of subversion and hope (however slight).2

In the beginning, as so often, was a footnote. The footnote that aroused my interest in this particular topic belongs to Gerhard Scheit’s discussion, in his marvellous book on the functioning of drama, opera and film in antisemitic discourse, of Schoenberg’s much discussed Survivor from Warsaw.3 Explaining Adorno’s critique of this piece, Scheit explains that ‘for the Adorno of “Commitment”, a total Bilderverbot applied—hence he accused Schönberg’s piece of a certain aestheticization of the horror’.4

In the passage in question, Adorno stated that there was something ‘embarrassing’ about the Survivor from Warsaw. Adorno clarified that he (obviously) did not mean the irritation felt by people in Germany ‘because it will not let them repress what they want at all costs to repress’. Adorno’s concern lay elsewhere. ‘All its harshness and irreconcilability notwithstanding’, Adorno argued, Schoenberg’s Survivor: [. . .] turns [that which people in Germany would like to forget] into an image [emphasis added] and thus the sense of shame vis-à-vis the victims is violated after all. Something is made out of them, [namely] art works put out to be gobbled up by the world that killed them. The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain experienced by those who were bludgeoned with rifle butts has the potential, however remote, to facilitate the extraction of pleasure. [. . .] By resorting to aesthetic stylization, and particularly through the solemn prayer of the choir,5 the inconceivable fate is presented as though it had some sort of purpose.6

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Yet as Scheit goes on to point out in his footnote,

with this statement Adorno was in fact contradicting himself—in his earlier essay on Schönberg we read about the *Survivor*: ‘Never has horror sounded so true in music and as it becomes audible the negation allows the music to regain its ability to deconstruct. The Jewish hymn with which the “Survivor from Warsaw” ends represents music as the human objection to myth’.

What are we to make of this apparent contradiction? When discussing problems of representing the Shosha with students, I regularly use the *Survivor* and these two passages. My suggestion to the students, really just a hunch, has always been that the contradiction between Adorno’s two statements is indicative not so much of genuine confusion on his part, but rather of the complexity of the issue and the subtlety of his mind in grappling with it.

I should add that my focus in class has always tended to be on Adorno’s critique of the arguably redemptive message of Schoenberg’s piece rather than its transgression of the prohibition of the image (not that these two issues can be neatly separated, of course). On the latter count, which will be the main focus of this discussion, it seems hard to refute Adorno’s observation. As Scheit has rather aptly put it, with the roll call and the concluding rendering of the *shema*, what the narrator of the *Survivor* sets out to report ‘suddenly “really” happens’.

One might very well wonder whether there is really anything more to be said on all this. Following my initial reading, I was rather sceptical. From among the relevant scholarship of the last decade I would point to the texts by Elizabeth Pritchard, Richard Leppert, and Dan Webb, not because I agree with them on every count, but because they have, each in their varied way, done an exemplary job not only of rendering accessible Adorno’s stance and some of the problems it raises, but also of making comprehensible why all this matters. Yet, just as I was at risk of settling into a false sense of security, *The Cambridge Companion to Schoenberg* made its appearance on the shelf at the Cambridge University Press Bookshop. The only sustained discussion of Adorno’s grappling with Schoenberg in this volume is offered in Richard Kurth’s chapter on the *locus classicus* for the debate on Schoenberg and the prohibition of the image, his opera *Moses und Aron*, seen by many as ‘a meta-opera, an opera about the nature of opera’ that ultimately ‘only affirms the untenability of what it puts to the test’.

In some ways I owe Kurth an apology for the way in which I will pick on him in this chapter. I certainly would not have done so had his text appeared as an individual contribution to some other publication. Yet the *Cambridge Companions* are not just any publication, they are (often quite rightly so, of course) one of the first ports of call for many students and scholars approaching a (new) topic. It is the significance of his text as a contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Schoenberg*, rather than the shortcomings displayed in this text by Kurth as an individual scholar, that concern me. On Kurth’s account, his chapter ‘offers a counterpoise to the Adornian polemic, by questioning some of its fundamental assumptions, and
by contextualizing and reinterpreting others'. Yet Kurth's account is perplexing, to say the least, and clearly predicated on some fairly fundamental misunderstandings of Adorno's stance.

It seems evident that these misunderstandings result in part from a rather simplistic and literalist reading of Adorno's statements about *Moses und Aron* and in part from a very narrow focus almost exclusively on the one text that Adorno wrote specifically about this opera. There is an added irony to this insofar as this approach, by defining its focus so narrowly, ultimately ignores, in grappling with Schoenberg's music and Adorno's critique alike, what Robert Witkin has called the 'part-part and part-whole relations' so central to Adorno's thought. Witkin suggests that 'a basic formulation of part-part and part-whole relations [...] recurs in all Adorno's discussions of form and structure from social formation to the musical formation of the sonata or rondo'.

Form, as Adorno sees it, is 'the non-violent synthesis of the disparate that it nevertheless maintains as that which it is, in its diversity and contradictions'. Form's 'relationship to its other that it preserves even though it mitigates its strangeness makes it the anti-barbaric aspect of art'. It is through form that art 'partakes of the civilization that it criticizes by its very existence'. Yet inevitably, anything that is formed is also limited in the process. The artistic activity of imposing form 'always selects, cuts away, foregoes: there is no form without rejection. Hence the guilt of domination is extended into the works of art that seek to rid themselves of it'.

Truth in music, on Adorno's account, resides in the degree to which it succeeds in relating its various elements both to one another and to the whole without subordinating them to it. Bach's sense of form, Adorno argues, sprang 'not from respect for traditional forms but from his ability to keep them in flux or, more correctly, to prevent them from consolidating in the first place'. The 'non-violent quality' of Mozart's music resulted from his ability to create an equilibrium between disparate elements without subjugating them. As is well known, Adorno was particularly fascinated with Beethoven's late string quartets 'because they reside on the verge of disintegration' and 'disintegration is the truth of integral art'. Conversely, as Adorno saw it, *Moses und Aron* was characterised by 'integrative force' and a 'primacy of the whole over the details enslaved by the composer's iron hand'. This judgement may be right, it may be wrong, but it certainly cannot be refuted by pointing, as Kurth does, to individual details within the opera as though their existence, in and of itself, could sway the evaluation of the opera's 'part-part and part-whole relations' one way or the other.

Kurth's line of argument is fundamentally predicated on the assumption that Adorno's critique can be refuted by showing that Schoenberg did not intentionally set out to achieve what Adorno describes as the outcome of Schoenberg's endeavours. Schoenberg's intentions, in other words, take centre stage in judging the validity of Adorno's critique. 'Schoenberg's own conception of the twelve-tone technique notwithstanding', for instance, Adorno had the temerity to evaluate it in a way that partly differed from Schoenberg's own assessment. We are told that 'Schoenberg began "The Relationship to the Text", a text written in 1912, 'by refuting conjure up Schoenberg spread as of should Schbelaboring' relationship undermine' once that g later). Like assumption with Schoen.

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by refuting the notion—nevertheless belabored by Adorno—that music must conjure up images. On closer inspection of the passage cited, it transpires that Schoenberg in no way refuted this notion but simply posited that it was ‘as widespread as only the fallacious and banal can be’. More importantly, though, why should Schoenberg’s claim to the contrary prevent Adorno from ‘nevertheless belaboring’ this notion? According to Kurth, remarks by Schoenberg about his relationship to his (as Schoenberg saw it, inexistent) audience supposedly ‘totally undermine’ Adorno’s claim that Schoenberg’s music adheres to a frame of reference that goes beyond Schoenberg’s own subjective motivation (more on this later). Likewise, to give just one further example, according to Kurth, ‘Adorno’s assumption that Schoenberg tried to represent the unrepresentable clashed badly with Schoenberg’s declared aesthetic position’. The obvious problem with this line of argument is that, for Adorno, artists’ intentions are only one among a complex set of social, historical and artistic factors that determine artistic production, and hardly a crucial one, at that, arguably quite the opposite. ‘What makes works of art hum’, he wrote in his posthumously published *Asthetische Theorie*, ‘is the friction between the antagonistic elements that it seeks to bring together’. Artists’ intentions were only one of these antagonistic elements and artists’ objective and structural inability simply to implement these intentions at will formed a crucial source of the tensions that made works of art ‘hum’. Likewise, ‘to perform a play or a piece of music correctly is to formulate it correctly as a problem’, Adorno argued, ‘so that the irreconcilable demands it places on the performing artist are recognized. The task of adequate rendition’, consequently, was ‘infinite on principle’. According to Adorno, ‘art seeks to emulate a form of expression that is not implanted human intention. The latter is merely its vehicle. The more consummate a work of art, the more it sheds its intentions’. Adorno also argued that qualitative differences that become evident in the afterlives of works of art ‘by no means coincide with their degree of modernity in their own time. […] Even creations that had not attained the technical standard of their time […] communicate with later periods and this precisely because of that which set them apart from their own era’. It is a very long way from here to the notion that individual artists in general and composers in particular could in any straightforward way be held personally responsible for getting it ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Yet this seems to be very much the level on which Kurth seeks to engage Adorno’s critique. It is perhaps worth adding that one by no means needs to focus on the wider context to grasp this. It is patent clear from Adorno’s “Sakrales Fragment”, the text specifically about *Moses und Aron*, that Adorno is concerned with what he considers the objective dynamics of Schoenberg’s works rather than Schoenberg’s subjective intentions. There too, Adorno argues that ‘the innermost […] objective intention’ of a piece remains unknown to the composer and refers to the opera’s ‘classicism contre coeur’. Now, my point here is obviously not that Kurth needs to agree with Adorno’s analysis. I would argue, however, that he cannot try to refute it without actually...
taking it seriously on its own terms in the first place. The contention that Schoenberg unwittingly or in spite of himself produced a particular sort of music obviously cannot be refuted by establishing that this was not what Schoenberg set out to do.

How wide Kurth is of the mark becomes evident when he sets out to demonstrate that the music of Moses und Aron ‘is not a naive attempt to depict and manifest the ineffable or the Divine’—something Adorno never suggested in this form in the first place—in order subsequently to consider his job done when he concludes that ‘Schoenberg’s ability to observe the Bilderverbot extended much further than Adorno imagined’. What Kurth seems to have missed entirely is the fact that for Adorno, Schoenberg’s Moses und Aron goes both not far enough and too far in this respect. Kurth shows no appreciation of what Elizabeth Pritchard has called ‘Adorno’s critique of the political liabilities of the Bilderverbot’. Pritchard offers an enormously engaging account of Adorno’s grappling with the Bilderverbot. On her reading, ‘Adorno envisions the Bilderverbot as a constant reminder that a given referent (divine or mundane) must never be reduced to our representations of it’, and he ‘distributes the privilege of resisting representations, i.e., the Bilderverbot, to all referents. No longer the purview of the divine, Adorno casts this lifesaving buffer to all that is at risk of being summoned and named by the ruling elite’. Adorno’s fundamental concern, Pritchard argues, is ‘not the maintenance of the transcendent character of the absolute, but the maintenance of its imperative character’. Descriptions or images, in other words, have the potential ‘to turn what should be regarded as yet to be fulfilled ethical imperatives into nice-sounding slogans’ and thus to ‘conceal the reality of damaged life by anticipating, indeed pre-supposing, its self-correction’.

Yet Pritchard also argues compellingly that ‘Adorno’s endorsement of the Bilderverbot was in fact ‘a qualified one’. Pritchard cites a passage from Negative Dialektik in which Adorno comments on what he identifies as a modern intensification of the Bilderverbot. Where it had once extended to naming the name, the mere thought of hope was now seen to violate it. Instead of applying selectively to the deity or the redeemed world to come, any thought of change for the better, however limited, now seemed to fall under the ban, thus rendering everything but the status quo illegitimate and, paradoxically, becoming affirmative. With this intensification of the ban, demythologisation was devouring itself, much as the mythical gods liked to devour their offspring, and recoiling into myth. In short, Adorno consistently warns that modern appropriations of the Bilderverbot [...] atrophy critical thinking and utopian longing, and thus underwrite the continuation of ‘damaged life’.

Consequently, for Adorno the ethical and political potential of the Bilderverbot is fully exploited only when it includes the demonstration as to why various identifications of the absolute are insufficient’. What is needed, in other words, is ‘determinate, as opposed to abstract, negation’. This form of determinate negation Adorno expressly identified as springing from Jewish tradition. As Pritchard points out, Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in Dialectics of Enlightenment that ‘the Jewish religion [...] associates hope only with the prohibition against calling on what is false form of negation that Adorno that ‘entails but rather a pass for the [...] the Mosis und Aron’论证 of the point argues there [...] gets c resoring to Schoenberg’.

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what is false as God, against invoking the finite as the infinite, lies as truth’, a
form of negation, in other words, that ‘is not abstract’. Pritchard thus concludes
that Adorno was propagating ‘a specific, Jewish, deployment of the Bilderverbot’
that ‘entails not an indiscriminate negation of any and all images of the divine,
but rather a judicious analysis of and denunciation of that which would reign to
pass for the absolute’.59

None too surprisingly, Adorno’s ‘Sakrales Fragment’, his critique of Moses
und Aron that is at the heart of Kurth’s engagement of Adorno, features promi-
nently in Pritchard’s discussion of ‘Adorno’s wariness of the ideological implica-
tions of the modern enforcement of the Bilderverbot’. 59 As she points out, Adorno
argues there that ‘in Schoenberg’s development [...] expression as negativity
[...] gets carried away to the point where it becomes negative theology’. By
resorting to negation in so radical but indeterminate a fashion, in other words,
Schoenberg’s approach ultimately ‘assumes positivity’ again.51

Arguably, Adorno’s critique at this point is borne out not least by Bluma Gold-
stein’s careful analysis of Schoenberg’s treatment of the relevant biblical material
in Moses und Aron. Goldstein makes a compelling case that, compared with
the biblical accounts, Schoenberg’s Moses ‘adopted a conception of the deity far
more abstract and rigid than the deity himself holds; and that Moses’s demands
for conformity to his ideas exceed even God’s expectations’.52 Indeed, on several
occasions, ‘Aaron’s views and insights’, as Schoenberg portrays them, ‘conform
more closely to the biblical text than do those of Moses’.53 For instance, Schoen-
berg’s Moses considers the pillars of cloud and fire that lead Israel through the
desert a violation of the Bilderverbot.54 In the opera, it is Aaron, not Moses, who
strikes the rock with his rod rather than speaking to it (Numbers 20) and it is
Aaron, not God, who promises an actual land to the people, and in both cases
he is subsequently criticised by Moses for doing so.55 ‘The Bible notwithstanding’,
Schoenberg’s Moses also castigates Aaron for performing the wonders that
God had instructed Moses to perform should the people not believe (Exodus 4).56
Schoenberg’s Moses destroys the tablets not the moment he sees the goings on
around the golden calf but in response to Aaron’s claim that the tablets too are ul-
timately an image.57 As Goldstein puts it, ‘Moses’s dedication to the mutual exclu-
sivity of idea, word, and image has imprisoned him in a conception of unmitigated
aniconism and austerity’.58 She speculates that this stark portrayal of Moses may
reflect both Schoenberg’s desire to distance himself from his own previous Chris-
tian affiliation and his response to the National Socialists’ ‘preoccupation with
images and symbols’.59 Yet whatever his motivation, there is much to indicate that
Schoenberg’s treatment of the biblical material did indeed tend towards the sort
of intensified and indeterminate negation with which Adorno took issue (and that
Adorno did not consider representative of Jewish tradition).

Towards the end of his critique of Moses und Aron in “Sakrales Fragment”,
Adorno states that there was in fact more to the Bilderverbot than even Schoen-
berg wanted to acknowledge, and this despite the fact that few had heeded it
as Schoenberg did.60 Given the issues just outlined, this is clearly an extremely
complex and paradoxical statement and one to which Kurth’s contention that
‘Schoenberg’s ability to observe the Bilderverbot extended much further than Adorno imagined’ does not even begin to do justice.65

What, then, of Kurth’s attempt to refute what he understands to be Adorno’s critique with Schoenberg’s intentions? I have to admit to a certain puzzlement at his general approach, even on its own terms, for much of the material he introduces hinges on the notion of music as a uniquely ‘direct, unpolluted and pure [. . .] mode of expression’ (Schoenberg’s words), as a language that is incomprehensible even to the composer, as an artistic medium that ‘should also remain incomprehensible—at least to human cognition’ (these paraphrased notions Kurth attributes to Schoenberg’s reception of Schopenhauer).63 Kurth’s reliance on these notions seems strangely at odds with his emphasis on Schoenberg’s agency. I appreciate that these assumptions are not strictly speaking contradictory, but the contention that composers work their magic by deploying a mode of expression that is, and should remain, ‘incomprehensible [. . .] to human cognition’ surely raises serious questions about the credibility of their own attempts to explain the meaning of what they have created in cognitive terms. Yet it is precisely on Schoenberg’s attempts to render explanations of this kind that Kurth’s case fundamentally rests.

What Schoenberg has to say, specifically on the matter of the Bilderverbot, is in any case more contradictory than Kurth suggests. He proceeds to quote at some length from ‘an important letter’ that Schoenberg wrote to Kandinsky on August 19, 1912.64 Schoenberg’s premise in this letter is that humanity is surrounded by puzzles (Rätsel) that it needs to confront by learning to decipher them without insisting on solving them. Works of art are themselves puzzles designed to mirror these real-life puzzles, ‘so that our souls may endeavour—not to solve them—but to decipher them’.65 The crucial passage for the discussion here then reads as follows:

For the puzzles are an image [Abbildung] of the incomprehensible [Unfaßbare]. And [sic] imperfect, that is, a human image [Abbildung]. But if we can only learn from them to consider the incomprehensible [das Unfaßbare] possible, we get nearer to God, because we no longer demand to understand him. Because then we no longer measure him with our intelligence [Verstand], criticise him, deny him, because we cannot reduce [auflösen] him to that human inadequacy [Unzulänglichkeit] which is our clarity.66

Kurth infers from this that:

For Schoenberg, the artwork-Rätsel provides an ‘imperfect, that is, human image’ of das Unfaßbare (the incomprehensible); it shows Unfaßbarkeit (incomprehensibility), and indicates the human inability to grasp the inef-fable. Understood in this way, the music in Moses und Aron does not contravene the Bilderverbot: it does not represent God, but only the associated qualities of Unfaßbarkeit and Unvorstellbarkeit, and it does so with a Rätsel, not a Bild.67

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On at least two counts, this is surely a staggering exegetical leap. Firstly, Kurth simply switches from ‘das Unfaßbare’ to ‘Unfaßbarkeit’ and then treats these two concepts as interchangeable. Indeed, the following section of his text then begins with the question: ‘How does Schoenberg’s music signify Unfaßbarkeit?’ This is akin to treating the terms ‘the ineffable’ and ‘ineffability’ as interchangeable. The only aspect of Schoenberg’s letter that points even remotely in the direction Kurth is suggesting is his emphasis on the need to ‘learn [. . .] to consider the incomprehensible possible’ in order to avoid measuring God by inadequate human standards. Yet this cannot change the fact Schoenberg consistently refers precisely to ‘das Unfaßbare’ and not to ‘Unfaßbarkeit’ and suggests that the works of art he envisages render an image of ‘das Unfaßbare’. To be sure, he acknowledges that these images fail to provide the full picture but at the same time he clearly suggests that they are in fact conducive, provided one remains aware of their limitations. Whether this amounts to an acknowledgement of the Bilderverbot obviously depends on how one defines that prohibition. Ironically, one could interpret Schoenberg’s statement as calling for precisely the sort of determinate negation Adorno had in mind. Yet Kurth’s frame of reference does not seem to allow for a differentiation along these lines and, even if Schoenberg was thinking in these terms in 1912, there is much to suggest, as indicated above, that he was committed to an altogether less determinate form of negation when working on Moses und Aron.

Secondly, and perhaps even more puzzlingly, the passage from Schoenberg’s letter to Kandinsky that Kurth cites refers twice to the puzzles as being images, albeit an Abbild rather than a Bild. As is well known, Adorno himself maintained a ‘sharp distinction’ between these two terms, using Abbild to denote the straightforward visual depiction or reflection of something and Bild to denote an altogether more sophisticated form of representation. Irrespective of Adorno’s specific take on this, it seems fair to say that even on a casual level German speakers are likely to draw a similar distinction. They are likely to associate Abbild with a straightforward visual representation or likeness whereas the term Bild can be understood to mean the same but also allows for a wealth of metaphorical meanings in a way that Abbild does not. In short, on balance the term Abbild signifies a less mediated form of representation than the term Bild and Schoenberg’s description of pieces of art as puzzles that are an Abbild rather than a Bild of the incomprehensible is therefore not less but more problematic from the perspective of the Bilderverbot.

It is probably fair to say that Adorno’s use of terminology in discussing these issues is confusing insofar as he uses the term Bild with slightly differing meanings, depending on the context, no doubt in part because the German language gave him only so many options. It is worth noting that it does not have a proper separate term for ‘picture’, a term arguably much more closely associated with the visual sphere than the broader term ‘image’. This makes Kurth’s portrayal of the matter all the more remarkable. For in his attempt to denounce Adorno as oblivious to the specificity of music as an aural medium, he characterises Adorno as ‘preoccupied with images’, crediting him with a ‘fixation on image rather than sound’. He also claims that ‘Adorno cleaves to the idea that music must be
pictorial", describes him as 'preoccupied [...] with the pictorial, rather than the sonorous', and translates Adorno's term 'Bilderverbot' as 'pictorial essence'.

Whatever room there may be for misunderstandings regarding Adorno's deployment of the term Bild, this is clearly a misrepresentation. To be sure, the extensive use of the term "image" implies a visual imperialism of sorts, but it is quite obvious that Adorno did not use the term to refer exclusively to visual phenomena, nor is there any reason to assume that images need to be visual, at least no more than human imagination as a whole may or may not (have come to) function visually; and that music has 'a peculiar ability to activate the imagination' is surely not in dispute. As Matteo Nanni has put it, ‘Anyone who hears music is confronted with an enormous flood of images [...] whose materiality cannot be perceived visually’. I would suggest that if, for Adorno, 'artworks are non-conceptual because they do not conform to the communicative model of language, whereby an object is subsumed and reified by its concept, and 'artistic truth' is 'dialectical, discursive, and non-propositional', at the most basic level images are what works of art, irrespective of their particular medium, produce instead of propositions. Yet works of art are also 'process and moment in one'. On the one hand, the open-ended, and potentially infinite, negotiation of its 'part-part and part-whole relations' represents the process. On the other hand, the work of art as such can only come into being as an object by cutting this process short and reifying its 'part-part and part-whole relations' in one specific guise. In so doing it extends, as already indicated, the 'guilt of domination' into the work of art itself. It is the violation of the process by the moment, as it were, that creates the discrepancy within the work of art that discloses its truth. Paradoxically, this violation needs to take the form of a partial synthesis for the work of art to be produced in the first place, yet the ultimate failure of that synthesis is also the precondition of art's ability to 'hum'. If I understand it correctly, Adorno repeatedly uses the term 'image' to refer to the reified object rather than to the discursive potential that it has in spite of itself. He introduces the French term apparition (which sounds distinctly alien in the German text) to designate 'that which lights up, the experience of being touched', whereas 'the image is the paradoxical attempt to capture this most fleeting experience'. Clearly, then, as far as Adorno is concerned, without image there is no art and any suggestion that he subscribed to a comprehensive Bilderverbot would render his entire aesthetics absurd.

Nor, needless to say, was Adorno oblivious to the specificity of music. He repeatedly refers to it as arguably the least conceptual and least propositional of all art forms. Nowhere other than in his discussion of Moses und Aron, Adorno states that 'Music is the imageless art and as such was exempt' from the traditional Jewish Bilderverbot. Yet he then adds that it had since become entangled in, and learnt to emulate, the production of images characteristic of all European art. Here as elsewhere, far from making essentialist normative statements about the nature of music, Adorno is trying to assess the ways in which it is shaped by the complex configuration of social, historical and artistic factors mentioned at the outset.

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1 See most Gustav A. 2010, for of the Fre.
It is here too that Adorno grounds his claim, disputed by Kurth as we saw, that Schoenberg’s opera adheres to a frame of reference that goes beyond Schoenberg’s own subjective motivation. In *Ästhetische Theorie*, Adorno argued that the fact ‘that the work of art takes on a life of its own vis-à-vis the artist is no exorcism of the megalomania of l’art pour l’art but the most straightforward expression of its character as a social relationship that carries within itself the law of its concretization’. It was for this reason, he added, that ‘a “we” and not an “I” [...] speaks from the works of art and all the more purely so, the less it superficially adapts itself to a “we” and its idiom. [...] It immediately says “we”, regardless of its intention’. There may be many good reasons to question this contention but it surely cannot be refuted simply by establishing that Schoenberg felt sufficiently misunderstood by his audience to conclude he effectively did not have one. Nor is it entirely clear how Kurth hopes to dispel Adorno’s notion of the ‘we’ by pointing to Schoenberg’s use of polyphony, given Adorno’s claim that Western music’s entire harmonic deep structure, ‘including all its counterpoint and polyphony, is the “we” that has penetrated from the choral ritual’. Once again, I am not suggesting Kurth need agree with Adorno’s notions, but one can surely only refute, let alone discard, them by actually engaging them on their own terms in the first place. The same goes for Adorno’s identification of *Moses and Aron* as a sacred work. That Schoenberg chose to use sacred forms on other occasions but opted for the form of an opera in this case does little to dispel Adorno’s claim that ‘as a whole, any music designed to create a totality has its theological aspect, even if it knows nothing of it’.

Let me reiterate that my issue here has been with the portrayal of Adorno’s grappling with Schoenberg that emerges from the *Cambridge Companion to Schoenberg*, much more than with Kurth as an individual scholar, and this goes for my concluding remarks too. What makes Kurth’s rather perplexing account particularly worrying is not least the fact that it makes all the more difficult any attempt to counter a rather sinister current trend identified by Scheit and Svoboda in their recent book. On this reading, Adorno-bashing has come to replace Mahler- or Schoenberg-bashing as one of the principal lines of defence for those who would have us believe that we already live in the best of all possible worlds. Those of us still committed to the development of those perspectives Adorno called for in the concluding section of *Minima Moralia*, perspectives ‘that displace and estrange the world and reveal it, with its rifts and fissures, to be as indigent and disfigured as it will appear one day in the messianic light’, would do well to resist this trend.

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3 Schoenberg completed A Survivor from Warsaw for Narrator, Men’s Chorus and Orchestra op. 46 in the summer of 1947 and it represents his most direct musical response to the Shoah. It was first performed in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in November 1948. The reference of its title to the Warsaw ghetto notwithstanding, its narrative is principally concerned with the experience of a roll call of the kind that regularly took place in the camps. For an introduction to the background and context, see Michael Strasser, “‘A Survivor from Warsaw’ as Personal Parable,” Music & Letters 76, no. 1 (1995): 52–63.

4 Gerhard Scheit, Verborgener Staat, lebendiges Geld. Zur Dramaturgie des Antisemitismus (Freiburg: Ça ira, 1999), 508 note 162.

5 The Survivor from Warsaw concludes with, indeed culminates in, a rendering of the theme.


8 Not least, the Survivor is short enough to be played in class, indeed, depending on the student response and the course of the discussion, more than once.

9 Scheit, Verborgener Staat, 495, makes the interesting suggestion that Schoenberg’s focus here may have been more on the possibility of collective resistance than specifically on the recovery of religious identity. Needless to say, both these emphases would be equally redemptive.

10 ‘I remember only the grandiose moment when they all started to sing as if prearranged, the old prayer they had neglected for so many years—the forgotten creed!’ quoted in ibid., 493.


12 See note 2.


18 Robert W. Winkin, “Composing Society in Sonata Form: Music Analysis and Social Formation,” in Musikalische Analyse und Kritische Theorie. Zu Adornos Philosophie der Musik, ed. Adolf Nowak and Markus Fahlbusch (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 2007), 83 healthy’, or a work in such a and being responsible or the mu of these p relations The conj which rec writings is familiarity even a rel Fragment differently the corpus discussion

19 Theodor V. demann (I)
20 Ibid., 217.
21 Ibid., 327.
22 Ibid., 454.
23 Ibid., 454.
24 Adorno, 4.
25 Ibid., 465.
26 Kurth, "Im
27 Ibid., 183.
28 Cited in ib
29 Ibid., 184.
30 Adorno, A.
31 Ibid., 277.
32 Ibid., 121.
33 Ibid., 67, 6
34 Adorno, 45
35 Kurth, "Im
36 Ibid., 189.
37 Pritchard, ‘
38 Ibid., 512.
39 Ibid., 313.
40 Ibid., 296.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 304.
43 Ibid., 297.
44 Theodor W
45 Pritchard, "
46 Ibid., 302.
47 Ibid.
48 Max Hork}
Adorno and the Prohibition of the Image


"As Chorus and Myth Direct Music, in Mexico, in Oedipus Rex, all the kind of abnegation and moral Parable."

"Prize of the AntisemiticRendering of the" (1911, ed. Rolf 409–30 (423)), for W. Adorno, "The 10.1, ed. Rolf 152–80 (180), depending on whether Schoenberg’s notion of transcendence is more than philosophical emphasis as if prearranged creed.

Adorno’s Inverse


es und Aron” stadt: Wissenw-”s and Social 43 ans Schneider,

2007), 85–101 (88). ‘The state of part-whole relations that Adorno viewed as healthy’. Within argues, ‘is one in which the whole structure—for example a society or a work of art—develops out of the interactions among its elements. The elements in such a formation are all open and responsive to each other, changing each other and being changed by each other; the totality or whole that emerges from these relations remains open and responsive to them. Thus, while Adorno’s model of moral responsibility and freedom rests upon the free and spontaneous initiative of the elements or parts of the system—whether these are the individuals in a social system or the musical motives in a sonata—it also rests equally upon the responsiveness of these parts or elements to each other, their mutual mediation, and their reflexive relationship with the emergent whole that they are in the process of forming. [...] The conjunction of overall unity (totality) and manifold diversity is the problematic which recurs throughout Adorno’s analyses’, ibid., 88–9. The corpus of Adorno’s writings is, of course, vast and they hardly make for easy reading. I too can claim familiarity only with a fraction of these writings but I hope to be able to show that even a relatively limited amount of strategic reading around Adorno’s “Sakrales Fragment”, along with a more careful reading of the text itself—or to put it slightly differently, a meditate of attention to the ‘part-part and part-whole relations’ within the corpus of Adorno’s writings—is sufficient to reveal grave weaknesses in Kurth’s discussion.


20 Ibid., 217.
21 Ibid., 327.
22 Ibid., 454.
23 Ibid., 454.
25 Ibid., 465.
27 Ibid., 183.
28 Ibid., 183.
29 Ibid., 184.
30 Adorno, Ästhetische Theorie, 264.
31 Ibid., 277.
32 Ibid., 121.
33 Ibid., 67, 68.
35 Kurth, “Immanence and Transcendence,” 182.
36 Ibid., 189.
38 Ibid., 312.
39 Ibid., 313.
40 Ibid., 296.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 304.
43 Ibid., 297.
46 Ibid., 302.
47 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 299.
51 Adorno, "Sakrales Fragment." 463.
54 Goldstein, "Schoenberg's 'Moses und Aron.'," 167.
55 Ibid., 166.
56 Ibid., 173.
57 Ibid., 174-5.
58 Ibid., 180.
59 Ibid., 181.
60 Ibid., 186.
61 Adorno, "Sakrales Fragment." 470.
62 Kurth, "Immanence and Transcendence." 189.
63 All Ibid., 183.
64 Ibid., 183-4.
66 Ibid., 55, as translated by Kurth. In Asthetische Theorie. Adorno also characterised works of art as puzzles, albeit in a rather different context: 'All works of art', he wrote, 'and art in its entirety, are puzzles'. Formulated in cognitive terms, they were puzzles insofar as 'works of art say something and in the same breath hide it'. When one was 'inside the works of art and goes with them, this quality becomes invisible', yet as soon as one looked at them from the outside again it instantly resurfaced: Adorno, Asthetische Theorie, 182, 183.
67 Kurth, "Immanence and Transcendence." 184.
69 All in Kurth, "Immanence and Transcendence," 181, 182. Kurth does something similar when citing Schoenberg's "The Relationship to the Text" of 1912 (see note 29). As we saw, Kurth stated that Schoenberg began this text 'by refuting the notion—nevertheless belabored by Adorno—that music must conjure up images'. The relevant word in the original is 'Vorstellungen', a much broader term that need by no means have visual connotations.
70 Nanni, "Die imaginative Kraft der Musik," 51.
73 Adorno's point of reference is Kunst, namely the generic term for all the arts, rather than bildende Kunst, which would narrow the focus specifically to visual and plastic art.
74 Adorno, Asthetische Theorie, 154.
75 Ibid., 130.
76 For example, Adorno, Asthetische Theorie, 148: 'All significant works of art [. . .] have conceptual elements running through them; literally in the case of language, indirectly even in a medium as remote from concepts as music'; and 154, 183.
77 Adorno, "Sakrales Fragment." 458.
78 Adorno, Asthetische Theorie, 250.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.

*Briefwechsel, rth.*

characterised as 'art'. He insisted that they were hideous. When 'art is invisible', the surface resurfaced.

**Zeitschrift für**

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s of art [...]. of language. 54, 183.
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