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NOTES ON ADORNO'S 'MUSICAL MATERIAL' DURING THE NEW MATERIALISMS

BY SAMUEL WILSON*

If time is the medium that, as flowing, seems to resist every reification, nevertheless music's temporality is the very aspect through which it actually congeals into something that survives independently—an object, a thing, so to speak.

Theodor W. Adorno

[M]ateriality is always something more than 'mere' matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable.

Diana Coole and Samantha Frost

WITHIN MUSICOLOGY, and studies of the arts more broadly, materialist thinking is burgeoning. Georgina Born has considered how identities are constructed musically and mediated materially.¹ Emily Dolan has sought to establish, with reference to Haydn's instrumental writing, 'how music's perceived immateriality and absoluteness depended upon concrete, material changes in orchestral practice'.² Christoph Cox has proposed a 'sonic materialism' that seeks to give dignity and a theorizable basis to the materiality of 'sound itself'.³ In the present article I explore how one might variously modulate Theodor W. Adorno's concept of *musical material* during a time of new materialisms, such that it might resonate with new meanings. This is not, however, an 'updating' of Adorno's thought—'Adorno 2.0'—for a time in which an increasingly digitized, informational, 'liquid' culture challenges assumptions about solid, unshakable materiality.⁴ Instead, this discussion navigates points of dialogue: suggestions are taken from contemporary materialisms in order that one might begin to examine better music's place in and aesthetic reactions to material cultures; concerns are also voiced regarding the potential subsumption of peculiarly musical materialities into a more generalized concept. New forms—and, more importantly, capacities—of musical materials, called to our attention by contemporary materialist thinking, are taken as sites of aesthetic and critical intrigue. In this sense, I do not seek to synthesize

* Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Email: s.wilson@gsm.d.ac.uk. The epigraphs are cited from Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Some Relationships between Music and Painting', trans. Susan Gillespie, *Musical Quarterly*, 79 (1995), 66–79 at 66, and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms', in Coole and Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC and London, 2010), 1–44 at 9.

¹ Georgina Born, 'Music and the Materialization of Identities', *Journal of Material Culture*, 16 (2011), 376–88.

² Emily Dolan, *The Orchestral Revolution: Haydn and the Technologies of Timbre* (Cambridge, 2013), 7.

³ Christoph Cox, 'Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 10 (2011), 141–61.

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, 2012).

Adorno's materialism and that of others. Indeed, in an Adornian paradox, musical materials are instead shown to problematize preconceptions about and reified notions of what materiality *is*.

I have argued previously that, where Adorno's thinking is concerned, it is often more productive to aim to express something of the 'spirit of the law', over the 'letter of the law'.⁵ The 'spirit' and critical potential of Adorno's thought may be neutralized if it is followed too closely, 'to the letter'. In this view, one should problematize new fields of musical and philosophical inquiry in relation to this thinking, and resist the reification of Adorno's dialectics as 'philosophical approach'. His thinking demands creative misreading or, better yet, deterritorialization, in a gesture that does not provide a reified meaning in the singular. The theoretical text is productively conceived as a 'model of interconnection, a navigational tool' (to borrow a phrase from Rosi Braidotti), one that facilitates movement within a constellation of ideas, in which an object of discussion (Adorno's 'musical material') comes to be differently refracted given one's own changing position in relation to it.⁶ In this essay, this is done via the introduction of related ideas about matter, dialectics, and agency, constituting an exploration of the interconnectedness of aspects of musical material and materiality. In these materialist terms, I suggest a language for critically discussing music from Adorno's time and after.

'New materialism' is a term used by a number of scholars and practitioners to mark out some contemporary, interrelated philosophical and interpretative directions. In the singular, this term is a necessarily problematic label. A recent volume of essays—*New Materialisms*—reflects this issue in its plural title. Nonetheless, this volume lays claim to a certain kind of thinking, calling for more material modes of socio-cultural analysis and interpretation.⁷ As in other recent studies, this is defined in opposition to some earlier methodological turns: for Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, the radicalism of the 'cultural turn' is now exhausted;⁸ for Braidotti, 'neo-materialism' resists the dominance of the 'linguistic paradigm' as its mode of analysis.⁹ (New) materialism, as considered here, is thus not a distinct method, but a field of related concerns, questions, and theoretical inclinations. Despite engaging with material thinking, music studies has not yet taken account of some emerging materialist trends encountered in interconnected fields such as philosophy, art theory, and cultural and gender studies. I suggest that a potential first step in this direction might be taken via the route of Adorno's materialism. Thus here I present some introductory 'notes' on possible ways forward.

In these terms—and rather than providing firm, final answers about music's materiality—I hope to open the field to a modality of questioning and a set of theoretical orientations vis-à-vis music's materials. Furthermore, while new materialist perspectives have recently come to focus on artistic practices, music is generally missing from these discussions; symbolic of broader trends, music is conspicuously absent from the otherwise thoughtful collection *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts*, which contributes discussions on painting, photography, video, and post-internet

⁵ See Samuel Wilson, 'An Aesthetics of Past–Present Relations in the Experience of Late 20th- and Early 21st-Century Art Music' (Ph.D. diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2013), 21–6.

⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, rev. 2nd edn. (New York, 2011), 18.

⁷ Coole and Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms', 1–3.

⁸ *Ibid.* 6.

⁹ Rosi Braidotti in interview in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2012), 21.

art.¹⁰ Just as musicology could find something productive in some new materialist ideas, new materialist philosophies could likewise learn something from engaging music—an art that has often been considered to cut across the material and ephemeral, the physical and the abstract, problematizing each term in dialectical relation to its other. ‘New materialism’, as Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin put it, ‘takes scholarship into absolute deterritorialization, and is not an epistemic class that has a clear referent. New materialism is something to be *put to work*.’¹¹ This potentiality is something it already shares with Adorno’s somewhat anti-methodological thinking. Briefly outlining Adorno’s concept of musical material will enable us to identify points of connection, difference, and development in relation to current materialist perspectives. Doing so will enable us to navigate three principal points of dialogue: the first involves reflecting on musical materials and materialities as potentially active components in composition, performance, and listening; the second concerns the dualisms and dialectics through which concepts of materiality are articulated; thirdly, the issue of agency is considered.

ADORNO’S ‘MUSICAL MATERIAL’

Adorno’s idea of musical material appears in various forms throughout his output, and crystallizes aspects found in his thought more generally: the dialectics of history and nature, and the antagonistic relations of constraint and freedom under modernity. Musical material, for Adorno, is all that faces the composer in the present as inherited from the past: formal schemes, instrumental forces, harmonic and melodic formulae and expectations, and so on.¹² These have all been shaped already by a history of compositional practice. Carl Dahlhaus summarized this idea: ‘The concept of material as propounded by Adorno means preformed material.’¹³ Enigmatically inscribed in musical material is a history of past compositional decisions. Material must therefore be understood as historically situated.

At the same time, this material ‘finds itself’ in new and unpredictable circumstances in the historical present. In a 1930 radio debate with Ernst Krenek, Adorno stated: ‘The possibilities for composing already contain the sediment of history within them.’¹⁴ The basis of any possible compositional response to material’s new musical and social circumstances is mediated by a history sedimented within it. Indeed, past ‘subjective’ compositional choices, through their repetition, rationalization, and ossification, come to appear as a form of objectivity—the way things are. This dialectical reversal is writ large in the Enlightenment: ‘The totalizing and objectifying dynamic of modern reason necessarily regresses in its pursuit of progress, for the free subject, in dominating the world and mastering itself becomes the object of its own oppression.’¹⁵ The subject, in seeking freedom through progress (and instrumental reason),

¹⁰ Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds.), *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a ‘New Materialism’ through the Arts* (London and New York, 2013). Furthermore, a ‘New Materialism Training School’ on the arts and curation, ‘Research Genealogies and Material Practices’, was held at the Tate Modern in London in May 2016.

¹¹ Dolphijn and van der Tuin, *New Materialism*, 103.

¹² I should only give a brief overview of Adorno’s concept of musical material here, and its connection with his musical thinking more generally. This has been outlined many times, perhaps most clearly in chapters 4 and 5 of Max Paddison’s *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge, 1997).

¹³ Carl Dahlhaus, ‘Form’, trans. Stephen Hinton, in *Schoenberg and the New Music: Essays by Carl Dahlhaus* (Cambridge, 1987), 248–64 at 248–9.

¹⁴ Adorno cited in Paddison, *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music*, 93.

¹⁵ Daniel K. L. Chua, ‘Drifting: The Dialectics of Adorno’s *Philosophy of New Music*’, in Berthold Hoeckner (ed.), *Apparitions: Essays on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music* (New York, 2006), 1–18 at 6.

becomes only further constrained. Being a place in which the dialectics of subjectivity and objectivity, of freedom and domination, are worked through, the musical work is an inexplicable embodiment of philosophical and social antagonisms.

As Adorno puts it: 'Musical material itself is not natural material, nothing physical that remains constantly itself, but something historical.'¹⁶ Yet, at the same time, particular ways of 'doing' music, and aspects of music itself, come to appear as natural. They become 'second nature'. Crucially, this complicates our sense of what nature *is*, as one cannot simply disentangle the 'first' nature from the second. Furthermore, Adorno observes in music more generally a characteristically apparent 'naturalness'. Music shares a quality of immediacy with nature, in seemingly referring to nothing outside itself: 'In the case of music, as with nature, what is most striking is its *immediacy*.'¹⁷ Adorno's concept of musical material reminds us that, in fact, experiences of music and nature are mediated by history.

Notably, taken uncritically, *materiality* also seems to suggest immediacy: it appears to be the *stuff which is 'simply there'* or, like nature, the inert state of the world as apart from an active and autonomous human subject. It also appears as meaningless and without purpose. As Jane Bennett observes, the label 'material' is often appealed to as a trope of fixity, something denoting 'some stable or rock-bottom reality' (for example, the evocation of 'material interests') or some 'founding pre-discursive space'.¹⁸ Material, for Bennett, is never a simple fixity or brute physicality; she instead develops a notion of 'the material' from which energy or force itself emerges. Even with respect to aspects of the world that appear incorporeal, 'mobile activity remains *immanent* to the material world'.¹⁹ Bennett has in her sights the development of a materialism that is not contingent on an extraneous vitalizing force.²⁰ Her suspicion of a *vitalized* materialism—in which passive material is activated by something other to it—leads to her development of a *vital* materialism. In this she expresses incredulity towards the dualism of materiality as passive and immateriality as correspondingly active (or activating).

Here we find some initial points of contact with aspects of Adorno's thinking, in particular his notions of non-identity and nature.²¹ Under the logic of instrumental reason—under modernity's dominant form of rationality and the processes of standardization—both are distant, unapproachable. Yet, at the same time, non-identity and nature continually threaten to impinge into—or disturbingly flair up from within—their dialectical counterparts: identity and history. I suggest that this capacity of flux also, in fact, resembles a vital understanding of materiality. Materiality, like non-

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Sound Figures* (Stanford, Calif., 1999), 160. It is notable that Adorno implies a correspondence here between 'natural material' and unchanging physical material. This contrasts with the nuance of the language used in his discussions of nature elsewhere.

¹⁷ Max Paddison, 'Music and Social Relations: Towards a Theory of Mediation', in idem and Irène Deliège (eds.), *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspectives* (Farnham, 2010), 259–77 at 274. As Adorno himself puts it: 'Every art contains elements which appear natural and self-evident at the moment it is brought into being. Only the course of further developments makes clear that they have come into being and are therefore transitory, so that their naturalness stands revealed as a "second nature".' Theodor W. Adorno, 'Vers une musique informelle', in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London and New York, 1992), 269–322 at 275–6.

¹⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC and London, 2010), 58.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 57; emphasis in the original.

²⁰ Bennett claims that Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch come close to articulating this idea in the early 20th c.; their vitalism is faulted in their reliance on 'a not-quite-material life force'. *Ibid.* 63.

²¹ Indeed, Bennett draws on Adorno's thought in the development of her vital materialism. See in particular chapter 1 of *Vibrant Matter*. Furthermore, Fredric Jameson alludes to some form of correspondence between the nature and non-identity. See his *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London, 1990), 9–10.

identity, like nature, is always ‘problematic’; like these two other terms, it can neither be subsumed conceptually nor rendered inert. It cannot be isolated from the conceptual—or the ‘immaterial’ (an equally problematic label)—categories that it ultimately disturbs.

MATTER AS ACTIVE

For Adorno, the object is characterized by a heterogeneity that disturbs stable ontological categories, which for him were exemplified in modern scientific epistemologies: ‘To yield to the object means to do justice to the object’s qualitative moments. Scientific objectification, in line with the quantifying tendency of all science since Descartes, tends to eliminate qualities and to transform them into measurable definitions.’²² A critical aesthetics of materiality should, accordingly, recognize objects’ capacities for arousing a problematization of quantifiable knowledge—it would acknowledge what Adorno calls their ‘qualitative moments’. Many contemporary materialisms emphasize the capacity of matter as *active*: as a source of disturbance, force, or even agency (the last term is explored more fully below). In her *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett identifies in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* points of correspondence between his idea of non-identity—as apparent in objects’ ‘qualitative moments’—and what Bennett calls the vital *thing-power* of objects.²³ As she describes it, the concept of thing-power ‘gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience’²⁴. Thing-power shares with non-identity the character of a heterogeneity excluded from conceptual knowledge rooted in Enlightenment humanism and anthropocentrism. It is a force of excess that emerges from *within* material. Regarding non-identity, one also recognizes that ‘[t]his elusive force is not, however, wholly outside human experience, for Adorno describes non-identity as a presence that acts upon us: we knowers are haunted, he says, by a painful, nagging feeling that something’s being forgotten or left out’.²⁵

This normative exclusion of non-identity, one could note, echoes the position of nature under modernity: it is something that, through its domination via Enlightenment rationality, appears contradictorily as both immediately present yet also unknowable and alienated from us. Adorno argues for sensitivity towards the object and its heterogeneity, asserting in *Negative Dialectics* that it is only ‘by passing to the object’s preponderance that dialectics is rendered as materialistic’.²⁶ Music, being a temporal art, both denies a solid materiality while also proffering the possibility of being ‘an object, a thing, so to speak’ (to again cite the epigraph from Adorno). Ambiguous in its materiality, it is an aesthetic practice that is well-positioned to call attention to the problematics of its own material and conceptualization. Indeed, in doing so, music might raise questions about our experience and comprehension of materiality more generally. As ‘a thing’, it also draws attention to forces that seem to emerge from

²² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York, 1973), 43.

²³ See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13–17.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. xvi.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 14.

²⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 192. Bennett cites this passage in *Vibrant Matter*, 16. She suggests that what limits Adorno’s materialism is the fact that he ‘struggles to describe the force that is *material* in its resistance to human concepts’; he instead turns towards the messianic, of which Bennett is suspicious.

within, yet that simultaneously point to something 'out-side'. In this respect it resonates with what Bennett calls thing-power.²⁷

'Adorno . . . acknowledges that human experience . . . includes encounter with an outside that is active, forceful, and (quasi)independent.' The body is one site in which these forces' operations can be recognized. They operate 'at a distance from our bodies or . . . as a foreign power internal to them'.²⁸ It is important to note that Bennett does not—problematically—reduce the body to pure materiality or physicality. The body is imbricated in material processes that cut across its limits: she talks of *'the materiality of which we are composed'* and suggests that '[w]e are vital materiality and we are surrounded by it, though we do not always see it that way'.²⁹ This is already recognizable in musical contexts where bodies and embodiment are implicated in performance and listening situations. In musical performance, for instance, bodies enter into productive relationships with material phenomena: most uncontroversially, with objects such as musical instruments; more abstractly, with elements of the musical material, such as pitch, rhythm, and sound in its material presence. In a number of broadly modernist and contemporary works, performers and listeners are encouraged to navigate series of relations to objects and explore them as occasioning fields of expressive, often historically evocative, dynamic possibilities. John Cage, Luciano Berio, Helmut Lachenmann, Brian Ferneyhough, Aaron Cassidy, and many others—in many of their works these composers all provide diverse possibilities for exploring instrumental objects and our relationships with them. As such, performers' bodies are not regarded as isolated from the instruments that they engage with materially.³⁰

Pertinent here is Julian Johnson's recent suggestion that modernism might be understood, in one dimension at least, as a compositional attitude towards the particularity of musical materials—that these materials are negotiated in terms of their specific cultural and corporeal associations. Johnson draws attention, for instance, to how in his *Sonata for Solo Viola* (1994), György Ligeti explored 'a preoccupation with the particularity of sound—the tone of the viola's C-string, Tabea Zimmerman's playing, and an intonation that resists the abstract ratios of equal temperament'; this also implied 'a particularity of musical voice in terms of the resonances of time and place'.³¹ In this transformed understanding of modernism, Johnson suggests, one might recognize that the 'constitutive tension between the material particularity of music and the abstract schemes of its organization does not disappear, but [that] it has metamorphosed significantly over the last century'.³²

As Johnson implies, materiality and particularity seem to align closely. Proffered specific material in a work forcefully and immediately impresses on listeners the material situation before them: most obviously that the player is engaging an instrumental object with their body, and doing so on particular terms. So-called 'extended' instrumental

²⁷ Bennett hyphenates 'out-side' to mark out an attempt at the impossible task of conceiving the exteriority of things beyond the human: 'to name the independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things'. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 3.

²⁸ Ibid. 17.

²⁹ Ibid. 12 and 14; emphases in the original.

³⁰ I have previously explored embodied performer-instrument relations in Lachenmann and Ferneyhough's music: see Samuel Wilson, 'Building an Instrument, Building an Instrumentalist: Helmut Lachenmann's *Serynade*', *Contemporary Music Review*, 32 (2013), 425–36, and 'The Composition of Posthuman Bodies', *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, special issue on 'Bodily Extensions and Performance (Avatars, Prosthetics, Cyborgs, Posthumans)', 13 (2017), 137–52.

³¹ Julian Johnson, 'Return of the Repressed: Particularity in Early and Late Modernism', in Erling E. Guldbrandsen and Julian Johnson (eds.), *Transformations of Musical Modernism* (Cambridge, 2015), 36–52 at 37.

³² Ibid. 52.

techniques often foreground this process. Sonically productive encounters between bodies and instruments are staged in these terms, for example, in both Lachenmann's *Pression* (1969, rev. 2010), for a cellist who navigates surprising configurations of bow, cello body, hands, strings, fingers, and fingerboard, and his *Guero* (1970, rev. 1988), which sees the performer percussively run his or her fingers over the outside front keys of the piano, without producing pitch. Adorno's work would remind us here that instruments and instrumental traditions are also inherited forms of musical material, and that, as such, they are mediated historically. Conventionally, performers' embodied relations with instruments appear as immediate, but are, of course, also subject to this process of mediation. At their most radical or foregrounded, these relations are visibly divergent from a historically mediated and relationally constituted 'norm'. And thus not only do material particularities become the means through which to address the dialectically related 'abstract schemes of [music's] organisation', as Johnson puts it, but in addition, supposed universals, such as the normative conditions of music-making, become regarded as instituted dialectically, through their particular material iterations.

In seemingly foregrounding the '*materiality* of the musical material', in its apparent immediacy, this strategy seems to assert the particular as prior to the universal—a present though unknowable out-side that constitutes a moment of challenge to what is presumed. Writing in the field of critical pedagogy, Anna Hickey-Moody and Tara Page suggest that 'matter can often teach us through *showing us otherwise*'.³³ One might make productive links to the idea that matter provokes new possibilities for thought and practice, and note, additionally, that these possibilities might take aesthetic form. In the Adornian sense that art constitutes a material embodiment of social and philosophical antagonisms, music might therefore bring critical attention to and stimulate alternative imaginings of both itself and the material conditions constitutive of it.

Bennett's active, forceful out-side is encountered in musical materials—broadly conceived—which include those technologies that mediate the practice of composition and music-making more generally. In a musically 'literate' tradition of Western art music this includes forms of notation, and even things as simple as the pens and paper one might use to produce notation. Something might be said here of composition conceived as a critical approach to material production. It has been widely recognized that notation—and the practice of *writing* notation, as distinct from recording music through notation—has been of great interest to many composers and experimentalists. Pen and paper are compositional 'musical materials' in works such as Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, in which lines intersect the staves and scribblings 'connect the dots' of the pitch material. Morton Feldman, in a similar compositional gesture, 'used the word "material" to refer to musical nonhumans: instruments, pages, sounds'.³⁴ In discovering pens, paper, and other materials as *musical materials*, Cage, Feldman, and others opened up possibilities for new and unpredictable forms of compositional and aesthetic practice. These materials were active components encountered within the compositional process. Experiences of listening—in which one hears/feels music with/through one's body—may also foreground the body's capacity as a node of relations that exceed its own limits. Listeners, through the musical material, encounter an external object—this externality

³³ Anna Hickey-Moody and Tara Page, 'Introduction: Making, Matter, and Pedagogy', in Hickey-Moody and Page (eds.), *Arts, Pedagogy, and Cultural Resistance: New Materialisms* (London, 2015), 1–20 at 16; emphasis in the original.

³⁴ Mandy-Suzanne Wong, 'Introductory Editorial: Towards a Vital Materialist Aesthetics', *Evental Aesthetics*, 3/3 (2015), 4–16 at 5.

is emphasized in the reified concept of the ‘musical work’—something that seems to exist independently of them. At the same time, however, listeners are immersed in a sonic envelope that resonates *within* them. Musical materialities—in the events of production (performance) and reception (listening)—thereby intersect the body as a site of heterogeneity and prospective non-identity.

It is notable that Adorno’s philosophical pronouncement—that ‘[t]o yield to the object means to do justice to the object’s qualitative moments’—is echoed in a number of compositional and performance practices that seek to explore the qualities and aesthetic opportunities offered by various ‘objects’. In these cases the objects and the *thing-power* they possess are faced and engaged in moments and processes of encounter. These processes enact something akin to a gesture of questioning that ‘yield[s] to the object’. Such ‘objects’, taken first in the naïve sense, include immediately physical entities such as musical instruments and the pens and paper of compositional practice, and an exploration of their prospects and probabilities (the latter often explored through chance procedures); a long list of examples could be cited, which might include Berio’s exploration of the possibilities of various instruments in his *Sequenza* series (1958–2002) and Cage’s playful use of cacti in his *Child of Tree* (1975).³⁵ But these material ‘objects’ also include apparently immanent musical materials, such as the instrument-object’s expected role within the ensemble, particular gestures or elements of borrowed material (*objets trouvés*) that are then responded to, the qualities of which become subject to expansion and investigation throughout the course of the work. In an emergent elaboration through performance, the musical engagement with the ‘object’s qualitative moments’ seems to ask: what can the object do—what are its capacities for *poïesis*?³⁶ Further, what can it *not* do—what are the limits at which it seems to push back assertively, challenging the frameworks through which we presume to know it?³⁷

DUALISMS AND DIALECTICS

Adorno and many contemporary materialists attempt to problematize dualist thinking—a gesture emphasized in the irreconcilable (non-)concept of non-identity. Here, a key dualism for scrutiny, of course, is that of materiality and ‘non-materiality’ itself (be this second term ‘abstractness’ or ‘immateriality’, for example). New materialist approaches tend to eschew dualist modes of thinking that stem from earlier conceptions of materiality. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost note: ‘Many of our ideas about materiality in fact remain indebted to Descartes, who defined matter in the seventeenth century as corporeal substance constituted of length, breadth, and thickness; as extended, uniform, and inert. . . . According to this model, material objects are identifiably discrete.’³⁸ In this dualist conception, things are matter or spirit, real or

³⁵ On the latter, and the exploration of non-musical objects in terms of their sonic properties, see Andy Keep, ‘Instrumentalizing: Approaches to Improvising with Sounding Objects in Experimental Music’, in James Saunders (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* (Farnham and Burlington, Vt., 2009), 113–31.

³⁶ This question echoes a Spinozist–Deleuzian *idée fixe*: an interest in ‘what can a body do, i.e. how and to what extent can it affect and be affected by other bodies?’ Marie Thompson, ‘Experimental Music and the Question of What a Body Can Do’, in Pirkko Moisala, Taru Leppänen, Milla Tiainen, and Hanna Väättäin (eds.), *Musical Encounters with Deleuze and Guattari* (New York and London, 2017), 149–68 at 156.

³⁷ Regarding this last question, Anna Hickey-Moody and Tara Page have labelled matter ‘pedagogical in its resistance’, in its challenging of the presumed limits of knowledge and its associated epistemologies. It ‘teaches us through resisting dominant discourses, showing us new ways of being’. See their ‘Introduction: Making, Matter, and Pedagogy’, 5.

³⁸ Coole and Frost, ‘Introducing the New Materialisms’, 7.

abstract, object or subject. As we have already seen, assumptions about dualisms such as the life–matter binary are challenged when capacities like ‘activeness’ are argued not to be in the sole possession of one term (life) but emerging through the interpenetration of life and matter. As Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin state, in contrast with a Cartesian idea of materiality, ‘the immanent gesture of new materialism is transversal rather than dualist as it intersects academic (neo-)disciplines . . . , paradigms . . . , and the linear spatiotemporalities conventionally assigned to epistemic trends’. They propose that ‘new materialism is itself a distinctive trend, both in feminist theory and cultural theory more broadly, and a device or tool for opening up theory formation’.³⁹ It is in this spirit, as a manner of ‘opening’, not method, that I here draw on materialist thinking.

Dolphijn and van der Tuin have suggested that ‘reworking and eventually breaking through dualisms appears to be the key to new materialism’.⁴⁰ This ambition draws energy and terminology from past projects that challenged dualistic thinking, as encountered in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and that of the post-structuralists; some new materialists also call on those phenomenological traditions that blurred the binary of body and mind. Elizabeth Grosz, whose *Volatile Bodies* is a common touchstone for many new materialist thinkers, notes that ‘[i]n dissolving oppositional categories we cannot simply ignore them, vowing never to speak in their terms again. This is neither historically possible nor even desirable insofar as these categories must be engaged with in order to be superseded.’⁴¹ Adorno claims something similar: past thinking and practices exert historical pressures upon the present. (Indeed, this is central in his account of musical material; in the present one faces past, now sedimented, musical practices.) This goes for dualisms too. For Adorno, as for Grosz, they cannot simply be ignored or dismissed, at risk of their unacknowledged continuance. They must instead be engaged with and, as I would put it, worked through.

With respect to music, sound, and materiality, Christoph Cox seeks to dispel dualisms entirely, in a challenge to representational and anthropocentric thinking: ‘The materialist theory I propose here maintains that contemporary cultural theory’s critiques of representation and humanism are not thorough enough. A rigorous critique of representation would altogether eliminate the dual planes of culture/nature, human/non-human, sign/world, text/matter.’⁴² His suggestion is a powerful one, as is his reappraisal of the materiality of sound itself. However, his materialism’s limitation, I suggest, lies in this very dissolution of dualisms; I propose that, instead, they should be worked through (in line with Grosz’s suggestion). Cox focuses us on sound’s materiality. But in doing so, pertinent—albeit problematic—dualisms are effaced completely, principally those of music and *noise*, and of music and *sound*. (This is perhaps not a problem for Cox’s theory, taken on its own terms; by proposing a realist ontology of sound, subjects such as composers and listeners—who shape and perceive such distinctions—are of less importance to Cox’s philosophical priorities than they are to Adorno’s.⁴³) Cox begins by focusing on sound artists who in the 1960s explored *sound*,

³⁹ Dolphijn and van der Tuin, *New Materialism*, 100. It should be noted here that the terms ‘transverse’ and ‘transversal’ are used by a number of new materialist thinkers to signify an act of cutting across the boundaries between different disciplines, ideas, or conceptual domains. I draw on this usage here, although it should also become clear that I maintain a place for dialectics when thinking ‘transversally’.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 97.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, Ind. and Indianapolis, 1994), 24.

⁴² Cox, ‘Beyond Representation and Signification’, 148.

⁴³ That said, Brian Kane takes up this issue and offers a persuasive critique of Cox’s (and others’) Deleuzian ontology of sound in his ‘Sound Studies without Auditory Culture: A Critique of the Ontological Turn’, *Sound Studies*, 1 (2015), 2–21.

before a conceptual slippage occurs towards a discussion of *music*. In citing this issue, I do not wish to imply that music and noise, or music and sound, are separate entities. This would be to reinscribe the dualisms to which Cox quite rightly brings critical attention. Instead, I hope to suggest that such dualisms are necessarily problematic; music and noise, for instance, subtend one another; as Henry Cowell put it, ‘the noise-element has been to music as sex to humanity, essential to its existence, but impolite to mention, something to be cloaked by ignorance and silence’.⁴⁴ What emerges through Adorno’s concept of musical material is a sense that musical materialities are contoured by, yet exceed and ultimately destabilize, distinctions such as music and sound.

Against those new materialist positions that dissolve dialectical particularities into a monist ontology, I want to suggest that music be conceived through dualisms that when engaged cannot be totally effaced. (It is here that the dialogue between Adorno’s materialism and some aspects of new materialist philosophies becomes somewhat tense.) Indeed, musical materialities have enabled new and immanent forms of challenge to these problematic dualisms. The music–language dualism provides another example. Here the two terms have been conceived relationally. Andrew Bowie has charted, for instance, how anxieties over the nature of language manifested in music’s changing ontology during the late eighteenth century.⁴⁵ Yet the music–language dualism has been subject to critique too: from the side of music, one could hear Adorno’s own protestations about these concepts’ absolute division in his recognition of music’s ‘language character’;⁴⁶ from the side of language, one could read those post-structuralists who considered the musical, phonic, sounding qualities inherent within language.⁴⁷ Problems arise where the materiality of sound is celebrated at the cost of completely effacing its dialectical ‘others’: its social, philosophical, and historical situations. It would perhaps be more productive to talk about the material situatedness of music and sounds.

Historical changes in attitudes towards musical materials—and to sonic materialities—would also be forgotten if dualisms were simply superseded or elided. (It is in part for this reason that I foreground dialectical thinking over the monist ontologies expressed by many new materialists.) Assertions of musical materiality must themselves also be considered relationally; a claim to materiality is the assumption of a position that is *not* something else—first and foremost it is a claim against ‘immateriality’ (whatever this means). Indeed, music has, historically, been considered as emblematic of an abstract yet affective immaterial presence. To forget this would be to ignore its history, and the embeddedness of this immateriality in the very concrete practices of composition, performance, and listening. Bennett’s vital materialism is instructive on this relational matter: she does not deny the ‘existence’ of immateriality—she instead cautions that one should not turn to it as a sole source of meaning, as something invested in a material world that otherwise lacks meaning. In musical contexts, this is to say that practices that have produced music—that have produced musical immaterialities—are themselves material. These immaterialities—never

⁴⁴ Henry Cowell, ‘The Joys of Noise’, in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (London and New York, 2004), 22–4 at 23.

⁴⁵ Andrew Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁴⁶ See Max Paddison, ‘The Language-Character of Music: Some Motifs in Adorno’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 116 (1991), 267–79.

⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva, for instance, explored the sounding, musical, and material aspects of language. These are foregrounded in poetic language’s complication of the ‘Symbolic’ and ‘Semiotic’ aspects of language in general. See her *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York, 1984).

separable from the materialities that produced them—are features of fields of relations that constitute ever-new forms of musical practice.

It is in musical material as congealed history that an Adorno-inflected new musical materialism diverges from or opens dialogue with other accounts of musical materiality. Cox's 'sonic materialism', for instance, aims to focus on *sound itself*, referring to Cage's *4'33"* by way of example. The 'silence' of Cage's work provokes questions surrounding sound's own materiality, and opens our ears to sounds that cut across the human and non-human, intended and accidental, and meaningful and meaningless. As Cox writes: 'John Cage . . . celebrated worldly sound in *4'33"*, the so-called "silent" composition that invites audiences to perceive environmental noise as an aesthetic field.⁴⁸ All this is true. Yet, once more, Cox's thorough dissolution of the music–sound dualism is problematic. The very fact that any performance is regarded as a *musical* event is significant to the work alongside its *sonic* aspects: appearing in programmes and staged in concert venues—perhaps 'arranged' for an orchestra that sits motionless onstage—this event is also significant in its evocation and play on a tradition of musical performance practices. To forget this crucial fact, which Adorno reminds us of in his focus on historicity, would be to deny a meaningful capacity of what Cage takes as his 'musical material': the performance and listening event itself.

Thus, in a seemingly paradoxical move, I suggest that a materialist reading of music would be most critically productive when focusing on features of music that are, on first hearing, seemingly immaterial—and through engaging apparently abstract tensions and generative differences between ideas such as music and sound, the abstract and the physical. An element of this endeavour would be the consideration of the strategies undertaken in the ascription of these differences. Rhetoric of (re)turning to 'the material' in twentieth- and twenty-first-century discourses would not be understood as historically and aesthetically significant if one omitted to mention that such rhetoric was offered in response to often unstated assumptions about the immaterial character of music. Indeed, examples of such attitudes are expressed in composers' own writings and paratexts: Harry Partch, for instance, argued for a 'Corporeal Music', in contrast with what he saw as other 'Abstract' musics;⁴⁹ Edgard Varèse referred to music as 'the most abstract of the arts and also the most physical'.⁵⁰ This critical materialism takes music as a site for working through the dialectics of the material and immaterial. This is one reason why I have insisted that one might approach apparently abstract 'immanent' musical material in materialist terms, rather than limiting oneself to observations about the obviously material: instruments, organology, musical technologies, and the like.

AGENCY AND MUSICAL MATERIAL

As Fredric Jameson puts it, dialectics involves the 'dynamic and productive act of setting the antinomy [i.e. the dualism, the contradiction] itself in motion'.⁵¹ It is not, as Adorno writes, 'a particular philosophical standpoint, but the sustained attempt to

⁴⁸ Cox, 'Beyond Representation and Signification', 155.

⁴⁹ See Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music: An Account of a Creative Work, its Roots, and its Fulfillments*, enlarged 2nd edn. (New York, 1974).

⁵⁰ Cited in Olivia Mattis, 'The Physical and the Abstract: Varèse and the New York School', in Steven Johnson (ed.), *The New York Schools of Music and the Visual Arts: John Cage, Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg* (New York, 2002), 59.

⁵¹ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London and New York, 2010), 43.

follow the movement of the object under discussion and to help it find expression.⁵² It is notable that this image of the dialectic resembles Adorno's view of compositional *practice*: the composer, faced with musical material, helps it find expression despite, and through, its own contradictory nature. Tia DeNora identifies two aspects to the dialectical position of the composer as a subject, both of which are active and passive in their relation to musical material. The composer is passive insofar as she must contour inherited musical materials that suggest their own implicit "laws" of development⁵³. Yet, these 'laws'—laws that have become second nature—are themselves the products of previous generations' compositional choices. "[M]aterial" is itself a crystallisation of the creative impulse, an element socially predetermined through the consciousness of man', as Adorno puts it.⁵⁴ The subject is thus also an active agent in responding to the 'needs' of the material and its relation to the social and aesthetic circumstances of the present. Furthermore, musical material not only demands solutions to technical problems on the part of the composer, 'it also involves a mediated relation to society'.⁵⁵ The composer is thus responsible to the material as both 'congealed history' and as it is situated in the social and historical present.

It is on this basis that DeNora argues that Adorno subscribes to a view of the 'composer as hero'.⁵⁶ It could be noted here that contemporary materialists have variously problematized the autonomy of the heroic subject (in distinction to Adorno's position) and, associated with this, the subject's capacity for autonomous agency. In this respect one could also emphasize the composer's relation to musical material as not merely extrinsic. Not only does she 'face' the sum total of everything that has come before her, in the heroic sense of the word: she is also embedded within musical and, more broadly, social practices. With regards to the historicity of the musical material, there is no *moment* of choice in the compositional process as such (I should be clear that Adorno does not state emphatically that there is); instead, a rather more complex comingling of subject and object, composer and musical material, occurs. Indeed, the composer crafts herself as a subject-as-composer through this unfolding practice.

It would be a mischaracterization to suggest that Adorno thought that composers maintained absolute autonomy from their material. One would do better to characterize the composer–material relationship as antagonistic: the composer is caught between the present and the needs of musical materials inherited from the past. This paradox is explored at length in Adorno's 1961 essay 'Vers une musique informelle', in which he considers the possibilities for the composition of music that emerges from the demands of the material.⁵⁷ If, as DeNora diagnoses in Adorno's position, the composer is dialectically both active and passive in shaping material, this raises a question: what is active as complement to the composer's passive aspects? Adorno's answer is the musical material—its needs and tendencies, which find expression through their mediation by the subject. In regarding musical material as 'active',

⁵² Adorno, *Sound Figures*, 145.

⁵³ Tia DeNora, *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* (Cambridge, 2003), 14.

⁵⁴ Adorno, cited *ibid.* 14.

⁵⁵ Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, 188.

⁵⁶ DeNora, *After Adorno*, 14.

⁵⁷ Adorno suggests that paradoxes arise in the 'situation which calls for a truly informal music': for instance, between abstract construction in composition and composers' spontaneity, and between the insistence on the necessity of 'structural arrangements' and the acquisition of 'contingent matter, external to the composing subject'. Adorno, 'Vers une musique informelle', 277.

however, one recognizes two things: first, that neither the subject nor her compositional ‘choice’ is autonomous; and, secondly, more radically, that the subject herself is imbricated in material processes that complicate her ‘possession’ of agency and choice-making as such.

Adorno’s discussion of musical material is embedded in a language of what this material ‘needs’ and its immanent ‘laws’. With this apparent autonomy, it might appear that Adorno implies that musical material possesses some kind of agency—it needs or even desires one thing or another. Such an implication may even appear naïve, founded on a misunderstanding; this is a confusion, one might say, between, first, features inherent in the musical material, and secondly, the listener’s projection of needs and laws onto the material, from a position exterior to it.⁵⁸ But I would like to claim that there are benefits to entertaining the ‘naïve’ view here (even if one does not subscribe wholly to such naïveté), especially if the material and listener’s mutual entanglement are understood to complicate a clear division between interiority and exteriority. Adorno’s language of musical agency, perhaps surprisingly, resonates with recent attempts to challenge agency as a solely human category—or one reliant on life as such. In a comparative move, Jane Bennett defends the apparently ‘naïve ambition of vital materialism’: she understands an ‘agency of assemblages’ at work in the world, in which agency is taken as ‘a confederation of human and nonhuman’.⁵⁹ With this in mind, could agency be conceived productively through a notion of musical material that draws together numerous registers, including those of the human and non-human, and history and nature?

In Bennett’s terms, elements of musical material may be conceived of as *actants*. An actant is ‘a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events’.⁶⁰ Its power and capacities are recognized only in its unfolding relationships with other elements: ‘An actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces.’⁶¹ In this respect, did Adorno not go far enough? Could that which was for him implicit be made, cautiously, explicit? Adorno perhaps sensed the agentic capacities of non-human forces; but without making this feeling explicit, agency remained for him something possessed solely by the subject. In these terms, he could not admit the possibilities for the agency of musical materials themselves, these strange and unpredictable admixtures of the human and the non-human, of history and nature.

However, to develop this notion of a ‘distributive’ agency, one located neither exclusively in the compositional subject nor in the musical object, is not to assert a model of compositional making that simply supersedes or replaces Adorno’s concept of musical material: rather it dialogues with it. What Adorno’s concept of musical material brings to any discussion of an agency distributed across the human and non-human is a critical historical dimension: if one were to characterize the encountering of the material by the composer as a moment of immediacy one would forget some-

⁵⁸ It has been said that identification and projection are the psychoanalytic categories that Adorno’s critique calls on. Sergio Paulo Rouanet, ‘Adorno, Theodor and Freud’, in Alain de Mijolla (ed.), *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 2005), 30–2 at 31.

⁵⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 17 and 21.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. viii. Bennett develops the concept of the actant from Bruno Latour. She quotes Latour: with the actant, “competence is deduced from [its] performance” rather than posited in advance of the action’.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 21.

thing crucial—that this musical material contains within it traces of past subjectivities as sediment. With this Adornian qualification, agency is, in fact, not only distributed ‘sideways’, across the composer and the material, but ‘backwards’ too, through a genealogy of compositional practices that encompass the history of past ‘subjective’ compositional choices.

At this moment of theoretical attentiveness to the non-human, one could remark on the relation between this concept in new materialist philosophies and the theme of dehumanization, one trope of modern life and art of which Adorno was highly critical. Adorno’s concerns with musical dehumanization were expressed forcefully in his infamous critique in *Philosophy of New Music* of Stravinsky, whose music, for Adorno, articulated lifeless and depersonalized musical forms.⁶² In light of this I should add that to take account of the non-human, and its entanglement with the human, is not to promote a ‘dehumanized’ materialism—at least not necessarily.⁶³ To speak of the non-human is not to dehumanize, when one considers the non-human as entangled with the human, and the human with the non-human, in practices such as composition and music-making. Indeed, efforts to look beyond the human explicitly reject dehumanization when these same efforts aim to understand better what it means to be human in contexts that are historical, ecological—even planetary. One could also note here that Adorno’s ‘dehumanizing’ and new materialists’ ‘non-human’ both relate to overlapping—although, crucially different—conceptions of ‘the human’ (as a shared ‘other’ to these two terms). Adorno’s post-Enlightenment subject evinced a humanity at odds with the dominating forces of administered society and instrumental reason; by contrast, the human of new materialist contexts is one inextricably bound up with non-human forces that blur the boundaries between the terms of the human–non-human dyad—a feature most critically developed in post-humanist discourses that take ‘the human’ as a contested category, one crisscrossing numerous political and technological trajectories.⁶⁴

A reappraisal of musical materialism enables us to recognize diverse and critical material practices in composition, and preliminary inroads in this field have been suggested above. Berio, Lachenmann, and others, for example, have sought to examine instrumental objects as sounding technologies with which musicians have embodied relationships. Indeed, crucially it is not only in these emphatically physical relationships that materiality is present: *a new musical materialism* as navigated here transverses the corporeal and the incorporeal. These embodied relationships are mediated historically, as Adorno reminds us. Indeed, history is also present in musical materials in the more abstract sense—that is, in terms of the forms and structures of musical works.⁶⁵ Transversing a dualism of abstraction and materiality, these seemingly ‘immaterial’ musical materials have been subject to reappraisal through their distinctly material

⁶² Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 2006). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I consider the relationship between Adorno’s dehumanization and new materialists’ non-human in greater detail.

⁶³ Some post-anthropocentric, new materialist thinking can become problematic when it purports to disentangle fully the non-human from the human, rather than holding it in productive or disruptive relation to the human—for example, where ‘technology’ comes to be seen as an autonomous force, totally apart from the human (the human in the technological, the technological in the human). A discussion of this issue, and its implications for music-making, is the subject of a publication in preparation.

⁶⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, 2013); Rosi Braidotti, ‘Are “We” in this Together?’, keynote lecture delivered at the Planetary Poetics Workshop at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London, 21 Sept. 2017.

⁶⁵ See Paddison, *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music*, 174–83.

aspects. The music of Wolfgang Rihm provides a clear example. Alastair Williams suggests that the recontextualization of sound, ‘through an unlikely combination of cultural and tactile associations, is a continual theme in his work’.⁶⁶ In his *Klavierstück No. 7*, for example, *objets trouvés* that conjure the spectre of tonality, compulsively reiterated E flat major chords, transform from signifiers of a tonal history to forceful gestures that insist on their material presentness. Indeed, as Rihm himself has said: ‘The task of art in repressive times is to be not just a refuge, but a repository of energy.’⁶⁷ Here, in a passage that ‘yield[s] to the object’, that navigates its qualities and possibilities, historically inscribed musical materials do not simply glance backwards: their energies fuel the motions and directions of the present.⁶⁸

It is perhaps unsurprising that, of the composers mentioned above, John Cage’s name has been cited repeatedly. His music develops in practice many features of materiality that are explored elsewhere in theory. For example, Cage’s compositional practice moderates the subject’s presumed dominance over musical material. *4’33’’* is a case in point. It is a work that could in many respects be regarded as non-subject-oriented: the composer withdraws from the act of composition as such; the listener attends to a sonic field that includes both human and non-human activities and agents. The indeterminacy inherent in this attitude suggests a recognition that materials themselves are not merely passive—neither deterministic nor mechanistic—but active and unpredictable; this event draws our attention to the musical and sonic Brownian motion that surrounds us always. In this sense, many of the sound experiments and compositional practices associated with Cage and his generation could be said to *pre-empt* ideas about materiality that were only later theorized. In an Attalian sense,⁶⁹ here music acted prophetically as an aesthetic practice that problematized assumptions about subjectivity and matter. Many of these problematized assumptions revolved around an anthropocentrism concerning the subject’s role as active and dominant over material that had previously been imagined to be passive and inert.

Adorno’s materialism foregrounds the historicity of musical material, its aesthetic circumstances and critical possibilities in the context of what has now come to be known as late capitalism. His idea of ‘musical material’ encompasses not only the, naïvely taken, physical dimensions of music—instruments, performance practices, and so on—but the allegedly abstract, immaterial categories that these material practices reinscribe yet exceed (tonality, theories of form, etc.). Just as Adorno’s concept invites urgent reflection on the historical mediation of musical materialities, new materialist thinking brings to Adorno’s materialism a rich vocabulary for discussing materials’ capacities and agencies. It opens avenues for recognizing and articulating in music the comminglings of the human and non-human, and of history and nature. Through a dialogue between Adorno’s and others’ materialisms, one might begin to chart the changing significance of musical material and materiality in music. In these brief notes, I hope to have offered some preliminary lines on which material issues may be traced, through both music and associated philosophical thought. Furthermore, while

⁶⁶ Alastair Williams, ‘Wolfgang Rihm and the Adorno Legacy’, in Hoeckner (ed.), *Apparitions*, 85–102 at 90.

⁶⁷ Rihm, cited *ibid.* 93. I have previously made links between Rihm’s ‘materialized’ use of history in this work and similar gestures in Schnittke’s music, which explores the process through which ‘the rhetorical content of what was historically evocative material is taken to an extreme, being pushed towards gestural violence’. See Samuel Wilson, ‘After Beethoven, after Hegel: Legacies of Selfhood in Schnittke’s String Quartet No. 4’, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 45 (2014), 311–34.

⁶⁸ Here I again quote from Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 43.

⁶⁹ See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Politic Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, 1985).

the music is playing, we are materially encompassed by it. Music appears at this fold between us and a material world that traces across and through us. As a transversive force it thereby enables us to practise a working through of diverse critical problematics concerning our own, and music's, material situatedness in the present—to explore its, as well as our own, material constitution.

ABSTRACT

In this article I develop a dialogue between Theodor W. Adorno's concept of musical material and aspects of 'new materialist' thinking. Correspondences and tensions are explored within and between Adorno's materialism and contemporary materialist perspectives (with particular reference to Jane Bennett's 'vital materialism'). Three main issues are discussed. First, musical materials and materialities are considered as not only passive but, potentially, as active forces in compositional processes. Second, dualisms are considered with respect to compositional practices, discussions of musical material, and their ultimate problematization. Third, the question of compositional agency is explored. Through a dialogue between Adornian and other materialisms, it is suggested that agency may not be solely the 'possession' of the composer: it is also observed in a series of diverse material and historical relations.