THEODOR W. ADORNO

TRANSLATED BY THOMAS Y. LEVIN

In the history of music it is not all that rare for technological inventions to gain significance only long after their inception. This was the fate of the valve horn with the chromatic scale, which did not become fully utilized until Wagner. The saxophone, a connecting link between woodwind and brass instruments, was already hesitantly used by Bizet,1 but only entered the domain of serious music by means of a detour through jazz. A similar development now seems to be taking place with the phonograph record.

In music, Technik has a double meaning.2 On the one hand, there are the actual compositional techniques and, on the other, there are the industrial processes that are applied to music for the purpose of its mass dissemination. The latter do not, however, remain completely external to the music. Behind both the

* This essay was first published as “‘Die Oper Ueberwintert auf der Langspielplatte’: Theodor W. Adorno über die Revolution der Schallplatte,” Der Spiegel 25 (March 24, 1969), p. 169; it has been reprinted under the title “Oper und Langspielplatte” in Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 19 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), pp. 555–58, © 1984, Suhrkamp Verlag [this and subsequent notes are by the translator].
1. Adorno is referring to Georges Bizet’s employment of the saxophone in the two orchestral suites for “L’Arlésienne,” incidental music written in 1872 for a drama by Alphonse Daudet. The composer’s hesitation regarding the new instrument is expressed in a prefatory note to the original edition where he explains that one can leave out the saxophone if one likes and have its part played instead by various other wind instruments.
2. In German, Technik refers both to artistic technique (in the sense of compositional style) and to technology. In his study of film music coauthored with Hanns Eisler, Composing for the Films (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), Adorno articulates this distinction with regard to cinema as follows: “In the realm of motion pictures the term ‘technique’ has a double meaning that can easily lead to confusion. On the one hand, technique is the equivalent of an industrial process for producing goods: e.g. the discovery that picture and sound can be recorded on the same strip is comparable to the invention of the air brake. The other meaning of ‘technique’ is aesthetic. It designates the methods by which an artistic intention can be adequately realized” (p. 9, note 5; compare also Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 15 [1976], p. 19, note 2). For more on the question of musical technique, see Adorno’s remarks in his 1958 essay “Musik und Technik,” Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 16 (1978), pp. 229–48, translated by Wes Blomster as “Music and Technique,” Telos 32 (Summer 1977), pp. 79–94.
technologico-industrial and the artistic discoveries there is the same historical process at work, the same human force of production. That is why they both converge.

As late as 1934 it still had to be claimed that, as a form, the phonograph record had not given rise to anything unique to it. This may well have changed since the introduction of long-playing recordings, irrespective of whether, on the one hand, LPs might have been technologically possible from the very start and were only held back by commercial calculations or due to lack of consumer interest, or, on the other, one really only learned so late how to capture extended musical durations without interrupting them and thereby threatening the coherence of their meaning. In any case, the term "revolution" is hardly an exaggeration with regard to the long-playing record. The entire musical literature could now become available in quite-authentic form to listeners desirous of auditioning and studying such works at a time convenient to them.

The gramophone record comes into its own, however, by virtue of the fate of a major musical genre: the opera. It has been more than thirty years since any operas have been written for opera houses that—if one is allowed to insist on such high standards—manifested something of world spirit [Weltgeist]. The supply of traditional operas on the stages reserved for them has, however, become folderol for opera fans or cult objects for culture worshippers. Thus the tireless efforts to modernize operas in opera houses with new sets and new stagings—at the expense of their substance. This confrontation as surrealist tease has itself already become institutionalized, and rapidly loses its effect. In its heroic periods, modern music distanced itself from the production of opera for opera houses and groped toward a theater qualitatively different from the high bourgeois representation of the nineteenth century. The current avant-garde has taken this up once again—probably most radically and convincingly by Kagel.

3. Adorno is here referring to his own remarks made decades earlier in "The Form of the Phonograph Record."
5. Adorno is referring to works such as Alban Berg’s “Lulu” and Arnold Schoenberg’s “Moses und Aron,” about which he notes elsewhere: “It is hardly a coincidence that since ‘Lulu’ and ‘Moses and Aron’ no operas have been written that were truly modern and simultaneously authentic” (“Zu einer Umfrage: Neue Oper und Publikum,” Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 19, p. 494). For more on Adorno’s position on opera, see his 1955 essay “Bürgerliche Oper” (now in Gesammelte Schriften vol. 16, pp. 24–39), which will soon be available in translation under the title “Bourgeois Opera,” in Opera Through Other Eyes, ed. David Levin (London: Radius, 1991).
6. Following initial experiments in the 1950s with musique concrète, composer Mauricio Kagel (born in Argentina in 1931) began experimenting with different electro-acoustic and audio-visual media, which he subsequently translated into various sorts of theatrical and multi-media performance pieces. Kagel also incorporated the theatrical aspect of performance itself as a new compositional
When, almost forty years ago, audiences began to chuckle about Lohengrin's swan and the Germanic beards in the Ring, this was not due only to the inability of an already sobered generation to experience art according to its stylistic principles, that is, in terms of its distance from the everyday. One sensed that, artistically, things just could not go on like this, that this very stylization was making opera into a marketable specialty item. The music of Figaro is of truly incomparable quality, but every staging of Figaro with powdered ladies and gentlemen, with the page and the white rococo salon, resembles the praline box,7 not to mention the Rosenkavalier and the silver rose. If instead one sweeps away all the costuming and has the participants, copying the practices of contemporary dance, dressed in sweat suits or even timeless outfits, one cannot avoid asking, What's the point? Why even bother doing it on stage? One wants to spare Mozart from this.

It is obvious that Mozart's operas cannot be performed in oratorio fashion without an unintentionally comic effect. Television broadcasts of gala opera evenings do not make things any better. A million praline boxes are actually worse than one single one that still retains something of the childlike joy of blissful moments.8 Radio operas merely produce the effect of a pale replica of the live performance, yet without relinquishing the claim to singularity that has become fatal. It is here that the LP makes its entrance as deus ex machina.

Shorn of phony hoopla, the LP simultaneously frees itself from the capriciousness of fake opera festivals. It allows for the optimal presentation of music, enabling it to recapture some of the force and intensity that had been worn threadbare in the opera houses. Objectification, that is, a concentration on music as the true object of opera, may be linked to a perception that is comparable to reading, to the immersion in a text. This offers an alternative to that which opera does in the best case — and which is just what an artwork ought not do — that is: cajole the listener. The form of the gramophone record comes into its own as a form of sound figures. The ability to repeat long-playing records, as well as parts of them, fosters a familiarity which is hardly afforded by the ritual of performance. Such records allow themselves to be possessed just as previously one

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7. Probably a reference to the commercial exploitation of the iconography of classical stagings of Mozart operas on the boxes of “Mozarkugel” (Mozart Ball) chocolates.
possessed art-prints. But there remains hardly any means other than possession, other than reification, through which one can get at anything unmediated in this world—and in art as well. One of the essential properties of operas, particularly such as those from the later period by Wagner and Strauss, is long temporal duration: they are sea voyages. LPs provide the opportunity—more perfectly than the supposedly live performances—to recreate without disturbance the temporal dimension essential to operas.

The gramophone record becomes a form the moment it unintentionally approaches the requisite state of a compositional form. Looking back, it now seems as if the short-playing records of yesteryear—acoustic daguerreotypes that are already now hard to play in a way that produces a satisfying sound due to the lack of proper apparatuses—unconsciously also corresponded to their epoch: the desire for highbrow diversion, the salon pieces, favorite arias, and the Neapolitan semihits whose image Proust attached in an unforgettable manner to “O sole mio.”9 This sphere of music is finished: there is now only music of the highest standards and obvious kitsch, with nothing in between. The LP expresses this historical change rather precisely.

At the time when music critic Paul Bekker was trying his hand as opera house director, he may have been the first to have spoken of opera as a museum.10 Despite the fact that when Richard Strauss subsequently took this up the result was reactionary, there is still something to it.11 The form of the LP makes it possible for more than a few musically engaged people to build up such a museum for themselves. Nor need they fear that the recorded works will be neutralized in the process, as they are in opera houses. Similar to the fate that Proust ascribed to paintings in museums,12 these recordings awaken to a second...

life in the wondrous dialogue with the lonely and perceptive listeners, hibernating for purposes unknown.

Of course, the LPs do bear the marks of the system within which they are produced. This is true, first of all, of their rather steep prices, the necessity of which—at least in Western countries—is doubtful. One notices many inadequacies in the LP that are probably the product of the longstanding unequal relationship between the extramusical technology and music in itself. The most dubious of these shortcomings, all assurances to the contrary notwithstanding, still remains the manipulation of the sound. Another sensitive point is the practice of making cuts within an act, the unity of which ought to be respected at all costs. Plausible explanations will inevitably be proffered for all of these, as one can always comfortably argue against the ends from the standpoint of the means. Once the industry becomes fully aware of the ramifications of this invention, then mechanical reproduction might well be able to help resurrect opera in a decisive way at a time when it has become anachronistic in its own loci.