

More than an Analogy: Rudolf Carnap and Theodor Adorno on Music and Philosophy

Trevor Pearce

“Metaphysicians are musicians without musical ability.”
– Rudolf Carnap

Philosophers frequently quote Rudolf Carnap’s critiques of metaphysics, but few have investigated his claim of a parallel between metaphysics and music. A similar parallel appears in the work of Theodor Adorno, a figure much more familiar to musicologists. Unbeknownst to many music scholars, however, the biographies of Adorno and Carnap intersect in many significant ways. Each became the foremost intellectual emissary of a cutting-edge philosophical movement in the second quarter of the twentieth century, and Adorno’s *Institut für Sozialforschung Frankfurt* frequently crossed paths with Carnap’s *Verein Ernst Mach in Wien*. Both of these groups launched flagship journals in the 1930s, with Carnap co-editing the journal *Erkenntnis* and Adorno contributing articles to the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. The first issue of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* contained a review of *Empirische Soziologie* (1931), a book by Otto Neurath, a founding member of the Vienna Circle.¹ Both groups had

¹ Ernst von Aster, “Neurath, Otto, *Empirische Soziologie*. *Der wissenschaftliche Gehalt der Geschichte und Nationalökonomie*. Jul. Springer. Wien 1931,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1 (1932): 159-160.

Jewish members and liberal reputations, and both groups were forced to flee Europe following the Nazi rise to power in 1933. In the mid-1930s, further interaction between the groups occurred when Neurath exchanged letters with the director of the transplanted Frankfurt Institute, Max Horkheimer.² This apparently friendly contact ended, however, with the publication of Horkheimer's essay, "Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik [The Latest Attack on Metaphysics]" (1937), which contained an attack on the ideas of the Vienna Circle. In the article, Horkheimer sympathized with the Viennese positivists' attack on metaphysics, but refused to concede that science was the only alternative.³ Representing the views of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer explained that a possible alternative to problems in metaphysics was through 'reason' as critical social theory.⁴ While both groups saw traditional metaphysics as outmoded and unable to deal with concrete social and political realities, the Vienna Circle wanted to make philosophy into a science whereas the Frankfurt School wanted to transform it into social theory.⁵ Given the numerous connections between the Frankfurt School and the Vienna Circle, it is striking that no one has explored the relation between the two members who have today come to stand as representative of their respective groups: Adorno and Carnap.

Initially, these two philosophers and their works seem to have little in common. Carnap is known for a rigorous formal logic articulating developments in mathematics and physics, whereas Adorno is known for an equally rigorous dialectical logic in the service of analyses in social theory and aesthetics. Although both Carnap and Adorno resided in Vienna in the fall of 1926, they held very

² See Hans-Joachim Dahms, *Positivismusstreit: die Auseinandersetzung der Frankfurter Schule mit dem logischen Positivismus, dem amerikanischen Pragmatismus und dem kritischen Rationalismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 69ff.

³ Historically, these episodes have been thoroughly treated in Dahms, *Positivismusstreit*. Moreover, the philosophical content of the dispute between Neurath and Horkheimer has been helpfully evaluated, though with a slight bias toward Neurath, by Thomas Uebel, *Overcoming Logical Positivism from Within: The Emergence of Neurath's Naturalism in the Vienna Circle's Protocol Sentence Debate* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992) and more recently by John O'Neill and Thomas Uebel, "Horkheimer and Neurath: Restarting a Disrupted Dispute," *European Journal of Philosophy* 12 (2004): 75-105.

⁴ Horkheimer writes that, "[o]wing to their median position in society the positivists see their enemies on both sides. They are opposed to thought, whether it tend forward with reason, or backward with metaphysics." See Max Horkheimer, "Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6 (1937): 4-53. Translated quotation from Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1972), 186.

⁵ Of course, opinions differed rather widely even within each group. For instance, while Moritz Schlick (the acknowledged leader of the Vienna Circle) still viewed philosophy as having a central role *within* science, Carnap wanted to make philosophy *into* a science. See Moritz Schlick, "Die Wende der Philosophie," *Erkenntnis* 1 (1930-1931); translated by David Rynin as "The Turning Point in Philosophy," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A.J. Ayer (New York: Free Press, 1959): 9-10/58. For many of the German sources I will cite the pagination of the German text followed by that of the English translation.

different occupations. Carnap published essays on the foundations of physics and taught philosophy at the University of Vienna, while Adorno published reviews in Viennese music journals and studied composition with Alban Berg.⁶ One trait they do have in common is their antipathy towards Martin Heidegger. Carnap's "Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache [Overcoming of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language]" (1931) and Adorno's *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* [Jargon of Authenticity] (1964) are two of the most infamous attacks on Heidegger's work. Though they take different approaches, both texts accuse Heidegger of concealing an empty philosophy behind obfuscating language. Despite such polemics, both men were in some sense political quietists, somewhat surprising given their socialist leanings.⁷ Perhaps the most interesting connection between the two thinkers, however, is their shared belief in a parallel between music and philosophy. This essay explores the hypothesis that certain of Adorno's musical writings can be seen as an elaboration on a brief comment made by Carnap in the closing passages of his attack on Heidegger. While this connection is conceptual rather than historical, it demonstrates that music has the ability to unite thinkers who are otherwise intellectually opposed to one another.

In "Überwindung der Metaphysik," Carnap claims that the statements of metaphysics are without meaning because they are not deducible from observation sentences, which are understood as precise descriptions of observed events.⁸ For Carnap, such meaningless utterances are epitomized by Heidegger's metaphysical sentence "Das Nichts selbst nichtet [Nothingness itself nothings]."⁹ Carnap pointed out that while a sentence of this sort could be associated with certain "images and feelings [*Vorstellungen und Gefühle*]," it could never be connected with publicly observable events.¹⁰ Metaphysics has no "theoretical" content because it does not offer a description [*Darstellung*] of states of affairs; it merely provides the expression [*Ausdruck*] of an attitude toward life – a *Lebensgefühl*.¹¹ Carnap still held this position

⁶ See Rudolf Carnap, "Intellectual Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap*, ed. Paul Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1963) and Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). Interestingly, twelve years earlier Hans Reichenbach and Walter Benjamin both lived in Berlin, and knew one another. See Momme Brodersen, *Spinne im eigenen Netz: Walter Benjamin, Leben und Werk* (Bühl-Moos: Elster, 1990), 71f and Dahms, *Positivismusstreit*, 60f.

⁷ See Carnap, "Intellectual Autobiography" and Theodor Adorno, "Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis," in *Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969).

⁸ Rudolf Carnap, "Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache," *Erkenntnis* 2 (1931); translated by Arthur Pap as "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A.J. Ayer (New York: Free Press, 1959): 224/64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 229/69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 223/64. Philosophy without metaphysics, what Carnap called "scientific philosophy," would be merely a method designed to clarify meaningful language, thus laying the logical foundations for science and mathematics. Cf. Carnap, "Überwindung der Metaphysik," 237-238/77.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 238/78.

over thirty years later, insisting that metaphysical theses have only “emotive or motivative” meanings and not “cognitive or theoretical” ones.¹²

And yet, this idea of an emotive or subjective meaning plays an important but rarely acknowledged role in all of Carnap’s logical and methodological writings. As Carnap recalls in his “Intellectual Autobiography” (1963), the term *Lebensgefühl* comes from the work of Wilhelm Dilthey. Hermann Nohl, Carnap’s teacher and a devotee of Dilthey, helped Carnap and his fellow students acquire “a deeper understanding of philosophers on the basis of their attitude toward life [*Lebensgefühl*] and their cultural background.”¹³ Thus the young Carnap studied mathematics and physics, but also tried to cultivate a kind of sympathetic connection to various philosophical texts. This tension is nicely summed up in Gottfried Gabriel’s *bon mot*: “With Carnap, so to speak, Frege’s *Begriffsschrift* lies on the desk and Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* on the bedside table.”¹⁴ The last section of Carnap’s 1931 essay hinges on a series of oppositions that mirror that of the desk and bedside table: *Darstellung* vs. *Ausdruck* [representation vs. expression], *Theorie* vs. *Lebensgefühl* [theory vs. attitude towards life], and finally *Wissenschaft* vs. *Kunst* [science vs. art].¹⁵ For Carnap, the resulting boundaries are rigid. Theoretical inclinations must be activated in the realm of science, while emotions must be satisfied in the realm of art. Carnap criticizes metaphysics for disregarding those boundaries by trying to represent *Lebensgeföhle* scientifically (and this is the brief comment mentioned earlier):

The harmonious *Lebensgefühl*, which the metaphysician tries to express in a monistic system, is more clearly expressed in the music of Mozart. And when a metaphysician gives verbal expression to his dualistic-heroic *Lebensgefühl* in a dualistic system, is it not perhaps because he lacks the ability of a Beethoven to express this *Lebensgefühl* in an adequate medium? Metaphysicians are musicians without musical ability.¹⁶

Music is thus the proper mode of expressing the very thing – a particular *Lebensgefühl* – that metaphysics expresses only inadequately. For Carnap, the parallel between metaphysics and music is that each fulfills an expressive need common to all of us. This is more than an analogy, for the two modes differ only in the way they attempt to express one and the same *Lebensgefühl*.

¹² Carnap, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 45. This view roughly corresponds to that of Carnap’s teacher Gottlob Frege, for whom an objective *Gedanke* had cognitive content while a subjective *Vorstellung* did not. See Frege, “Der Gedanke. Eine logische Untersuchung,” *Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus* 2 (1918-19): 58-77.

¹³ Carnap, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 4.

¹⁴ Gottfried Gabriel, “Carnap’s ‘Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language’: A Retrospective Consideration of the Relationship between Continental and Analytic Philosophy,” in *Logical Empiricism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Pablo Parrini et al. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 36.

¹⁵ Carnap, “Überwindung der Metaphysik,” 238-240/78-80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 240/80.

By drawing a parallel between dualist philosophy and the music of Ludwig van Beethoven, Carnap alludes to the connection between Beethoven and the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel that is subsequently made explicit in the work of Theodor Adorno.¹⁷ In his notes for an unpublished book on the composer, Adorno discusses at length the dialectical struggle as it occurs in both the philosophy of Hegel and the music of Beethoven:

The Beethoven study must also yield a philosophy of music, that is, it must decisively establish the relation of music to conceptual logic. Only then will the comparison [Konfrontation] with Hegel's *Logic*, and therefore the interpretation of Beethoven, be not just an analogy but the thing itself.¹⁸

Adorno seems to agree with Carnap that music and metaphysics can express the same attitudes and experiences: "To say that Beethoven's music expressed [*auspricht*] the World Spirit [...] would undoubtedly be pure nonsense [*Unfug*]. What is true, however, is that his music expressed the same experiences which inspired Hegel's concept of the World Spirit."¹⁹ There are two parallels here, one at the level of expression and one at the level of experience. The latter, for Adorno, concerns the world in which both Hegel and Beethoven lived. Both were born in 1770, and they died only four years apart. Adorno's reading of the experiential connection between the two figures centres on the French Revolution, an important event in the lives of both men. For Adorno, Beethoven is "the musical prototype of the revolutionary bourgeoisie," in whose music "the essence of society [...] becomes the essence of music itself [. . . and the] kinship with that bourgeois libertarianism [*Freiheitsbewegung*] which rings all through Beethoven's music is a kinship of the dynamically unfolding totality."²⁰ The music "shows how each individual moment [...] is made comprehensible only in terms of its function within the reproduction of society as a whole."²¹ Beethoven's music is not mere imitation or analogy, for "in [his] music society is conceptlessly known, not photographed."²² This parallel at the level of experience can be read in Carnapian terms: Hegel and Beethoven were using different media to express a revolutionary/bourgeois *Lebensgefühl*.

¹⁷ It is unclear what kind of "monistic system" Carnap is referring to with the Mozart parallel. One possibility is Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's monadology. Cf. Adorno's fragment of 1930, published as part of the "Motifs" in *Quasi una Fantasia* (New York: Verso, 1998), in which he compares the mechanical procession of a Mozart rondo to "the clock which the seventeenth-century philosophers imagined to be the nature of the universe" (21).

¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993); translated by Edmund Jephcott as *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 31/11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59/32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 74/43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 34/13.

²² *Ibid.*, 74/43.

For Adorno, this experiential parallel is only possible because the approach taken by both Hegel and Beethoven reflects a capitalist logic in which the free individual is pre-shaped by the universal whole; this leads to a second parallel at the level of expression. The structural key to the musical mode of expression in Beethoven is the sonata form. In its most basic (theoretical) incarnation, this form has three main parts: exposition (*Exposition*), development (*Durchführung*), and recapitulation (*Reprise*).²³ In Adorno's interpretation, the development works dialectically on the themes of the exposition, negating yet retaining them: "The category which, in this context, is identical between philosophy and music, is *work*. What is called conceptual exertion or work in Hegel is thematic work in music."²⁴ Adorno insists again that this is no "mere analogy," for both music and philosophy are shaped by their own immanent laws.²⁵ Beethoven's long and complex development sections are where the important "thematic work," viewed by Adorno as dialectical negation, takes place. The changing key areas and complex sequences of the development create individual negative elements which conflict with "tonality as the objective spirit."²⁶

Adorno comments upon the conclusion of the development of the 'Hammerklavier' sonata, noting that "after the B major episode, the main theme is exploded by the low F# as the new quality." Then, in the ensuing recapitulation, "the force of the preceding music [the development] subjects [the exposition themes] to the widest modifications."²⁷ This is paralleled, in Adorno's view, by the dialectical movement detailed by Hegel in the Preface to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807):

Science, the crown of a world of Spirit, [...] is the whole which, having traversed its content in time and space, has returned into itself, and is the resultant *simple Notion* of the whole. But the actuality of this simple whole consists in those various shapes and forms which have become its moments, and which will now develop and take shape afresh, this time in their new element, in their newly acquired meaning.²⁸

²³ Cf. Adolf B. Marx, "Form in Music," in *Musical Form in the Age of Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 78-83. This essay was originally published in 1856. In his study of Beethoven, Marx discusses the triadic conception of sonata form. He emphasizes the importance of the middle section, which he refers to as a *Durcharbeitung* (a working-through), recalling Hegel's conception of philosophical work (*Arbeit*). The influence of Hegel on Marx's theoretical views is clear; thus, the work of A.B. Marx lurks in the intellectual background of the Hegel-Beethoven connection. I thank Kevin McKenna for pointing out this link.

²⁴ Adorno, *Beethoven*, 33/12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33/12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 43/19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43/19.

²⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1987); translated by A.V. Miller as *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 17/7.

Sonata form parallels this philosophical trajectory: in the reprise, the music presents the same themes and motives, but these now take shape “in their new element, in their newly acquired meaning.” Adorno views this return to the same, its transformative aspects aside, as a ‘bad’ moment in the work of both Hegel and Beethoven. This is captured by a long passage in the notes:

[...] the *prima vista* most striking formalistic residue in Beethoven – the reprise [*Reprise*, recapitulation], the recurrence, unshaken despite all structural dynamics, of what has been voided – is not just external and conventional. Its purpose is to confirm the process as its own result, as occurs unconsciously in social practice. [...] It is exceedingly illuminating that Hegelian philosophy – whose categories can be applied without violence to every detail of a music that cannot possibly have been exposed to any Hegelian ‘influence’ in terms of the history of ideas – that this philosophy knows the reprise as does Beethoven’s music [...].²⁹

Thus the recapitulation, for Adorno, is a betrayal of the negative moment in both Hegel and Beethoven.

What Adorno likes about these two figures is their stress on negation, on developmental work; what he dislikes is their inevitable return to positivity. In *Negative Dialektik* (1966), he writes that the “Hegelian system in itself was not a true becoming; implicitly, each single definition in it was already preconceived.”³⁰ He would presumably say the same for Beethoven’s music. For Adorno, the equation of “the negation of the negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification,”³¹ and he accordingly seeks to replace this ‘identitarian’ dialectics with a negative dialectics, a continuous movement of negation that dissolves anything thematic or holistic. Given that Adorno sees ‘tonality’ as the principle of governance and identity (ideology) in the work of Beethoven, it follows naturally that the music that Adorno sees as breaking free of this is atonal – that of Arnold Schoenberg.³² In his very first essay for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Adorno is already speaking of Schoenberg’s music as instantiating a new kind of dialectics: “In Schoenberg [...], the breakthrough of consciousness is not idealistic: it is not to be understood as the production of music out of pure spirit. It is much rather a type of dialectic in the strictest sense.”³³ Although this reading of Schoenberg requires closer examination and study, it suggests that Adorno sees a similarity between his own negative dialectical logic and the musical logic of Schoenberg that is analogous to the similarity between Hegel and Beethoven. Adorno’s linking of Stravinsky’s neoclassicism with ontology and “unfreedom” provides yet another pairing:

²⁹ Adorno, *Beethoven*, 75/44.

³⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966); translated by E.B. Ashton as *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

³² For tonality as the abstract concept governing Beethoven’s music, see Adorno, *Beethoven*, 40/17.

³³ Adorno, “Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1 (1932); translated by Wes Blomster as “On the Social Situation of Music,” *Telos* 35 (Spring 1978): 110/134.

Stravinsky and Heidegger.³⁴ Thus we are left with a schema not unlike Carnap’s, but one that can be fleshed out more fully. Adorno’s writings provide support most explicitly for the place of Beethoven and Hegel in this schema, but the parallel can be extended to the other pairings.

	Primitivism / Ontology	Identitarian Dialectics	Negative Dialectics
Music	Stravinsky	Beethoven	Schoenberg
Philosophy	Heidegger	Hegel	Adorno

Of course, the common understanding of Carnap implies that he would completely reject an investigation of this type purporting to show the expressive parallelism between music and philosophy; yet, as we have seen, Carnap himself argues for the pairing of Mozart with monism and Beethoven with dualism. What this comparison between Adorno and Carnap shows, if nothing else, is that Carnap’s claims at the end of his essay “Überwindung der Metaphysik” are self-defeating. Because no analysis like Adorno’s can be pursued ‘scientifically’ in Carnap’s sense, no theoretical support can ever be given to claims like the ones Carnap makes at the end of his essay. In some sense, Adorno is more concrete than Carnap when it comes to music. For Carnap, music is about emotions, feelings, and attitudes, while for Adorno it concerns a social logic that is reflected in various arenas. Adorno purports to demonstrate that there are objective similarities between the logic of bourgeois capitalism, Hegel’s dialectical logic, and the logic of Beethoven’s sonata form. However, this is not a question of *Lebensgeföhle* for Adorno, but of an economic logic that Karl Marx was the first to demonstrate. Thus, depending on how one reads Adorno, and on whether one accords with his arguments, he can be seen as offering either a sociologically objective ground for Carnap’s comment or a *reductio* argument against it.

This essay’s juxtaposition of Adorno and Carnap, though surprisingly unprecedented, arises from their joint commitment to a parallelism between music and philosophy. Though the details of each philosopher’s argument differ, similar schematic outlines make it possible to read Adorno as elaborating on Carnap’s claim that metaphysics and music answer the same need – the need to express a *Lebensgeföhle*. Adorno believes that Beethoven’s sonata form and Hegel’s dialectic both reflect a certain capitalist logic, namely, a certain mode of mediation between the universal and the particular. He also condemns both Beethoven and Hegel to

³⁴ See Adorno, “Stravinsky: A Dialectical Portrait,” in *Quasi una Fantasia*, where Adorno claims that the reactionary, static quality in Stravinsky’s music is the result of an “ontological illusion” (150). In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that Heidegger’s ontology is also intrinsically static and reactionary insofar as it rejects all “historical dynamics” (93): “[Heidegger’s] historicity immobilizes history in the unhistorical realm” (129).

the extent that they embrace an identitarian dialectics based on the totalizing principles of tonality and absolute knowing. A way out of this trap is provided by his own negative dialectics, which is paralleled by Schoenberg's atonality. Carnap's philosophy of science, of course, has very little in common with the 'atonal' philosophy of Adorno; however, both were convinced that music fulfilled a vital social need. The two men did have at least one chance to discuss the issue: they met in 1935 at the Paris Congress on Scientific Philosophy, and by all accounts did not get along. Later reports of the encounter refer to Adorno's infantile behaviour towards Carnap and the other participants.³⁵ Perhaps things would have gone more smoothly if they had simply skipped the meeting to sight-read Beethoven's sonatas for cello and piano.³⁶

³⁵ See Friedrich Pollock's comments, quoted in Dahms, *Positivismusstreit*, 153. Pollock speaks of Adorno's "infantilism."

³⁶ It is well known that Adorno was a proficient pianist, but people are usually unaware that Carnap played the cello. In Herbert Feigl et al, "Homage to Rudolf Carnap," *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* (1970), Maria Reichenbach writes: "Carnap loved music. Once when I played a Bach recording for him he told me that the unaccompanied cello sonatas by Bach were among the favorite pieces he had played himself on the cello" (L).