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No Adornian Godfather?

A Search for a Comparable British Figure in Music Aesthetics

Raphael D. Thöne

There is no doubt that Theodor W. Adorno impacted the American and British Musicology and Music Theory movements – in particular, his *Philosophy of New Music* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are major works that are still discussed. However, his role in America and Britain was quite different from his position in Germany. His immense support for Schönberg, his tremendous aesthetic tirades against Stravinsky, the »point-zero-situation« after World War II and the misperception of his approach to serialism – he was not an advocate, but a critic – were major grounds upon which German avant-garde music was based. *Avant-garde* in Germany without Adorno – what would that be? In that context, his impact on German musicology is interesting to explore. His writings, although often sharpened by harsh, non-deductive and even highly subjective aesthetic evaluations (cf. his gloss on Sibelius), set the philosophical basis from which every (German) musicologist had to start his line of argument. Even if someone did not agree with Adorno, it was unthinkable within German musicological discourse not to discuss him. The long-standing discourse between Dahlhaus and Eggebrecht would have run differently without Adorno's almost almighty *habitus*. This article compares selected twentieth-century British musicologists, their roles in academia and their methodological approaches with Adorno's. Two possible candidates for a »British Adorno«, namely Hans Keller and Roger Scruton, are discussed in detail.

Formulating headlines can often be characterized as a creative play on words – one tries to punctuate certain aspects of an idea and to put it in simple, catchy, sometimes provocative but nonetheless appropriate words. If we discuss every-day experiences, such as the question of whether a certain actor has jumped on a chat-show host's couch, using catchy headlines seems to be the prime choice. But my suggested term *Adornian Godfather* may, at first sight, raise suspicions. First, did Theodor W. Adorno, as a major European figure in philosophy, sociology and, in particular, musicology, actually intend to become a »godfather«; and if yes, in what respect? Isn't »godfather« a rather ambiguous term? Second, is it even possible to suggest that Adorno's multi-faceted complete *œuvre*, encompassing moral, philosophical and cultural ponderings, can be easily put into an easy-going formula as the adverb »Adornian« suggests? And third, in the context of my intended search for a »comparable British figure«, how »Adornian« or how »Anti-Adornian« could he or she be?

It seems reasonable to limit the discussion to Adorno's musicological and music-aesthetical impact – otherwise this could turn into an everlasting task, underscored by the immense literature that is available, particularly on Adorno's postmarxist sociological theory. There is no doubt that Adorno impacted not only European, but also American and British musicology and music theory – in particular his

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Provided that we accept my initial thesis that one might be able identify a British figure comparable to Adorno, I intend to focus on four main aspects: first, which available candidates can be found in Britain? Second, which major variables characterize Adorno's musicological and philosophical standpoints, and which characteristic traits must a British figure have to be named in the line of Adorno? Third, is this British figure willing to adopt Adorno's particular style and academic nature? And last, has there actually been a need for an Adornian figure in the light of the unique and autonomous development of British music of the 20th century?

Let me first define, though on a very basic level and more in the style of a mind game, a few traits I can imagine to be attached to a British musicological Adorno: He – allow me in this context the gender generalisation – should be a trained and competent composer, striving for steadily-emerging and ongoing progress, or at least a qualified musician. He has to be educated in all areas of the humanities with a particular interest in aesthetics and the social impact of the arts in general. His writings need to be of excellent quality, impressive in style and knowledge, critical, sometimes even sarcastic, on the whole dialectic at best. He should always be willing to take up a distinct viewpoint, accepting all negative consequences so that he immediately becomes vulnerable to counter argument. His aesthetic values should reflect his heritage: influences such as immigration should sharpen his senses and may change particular views, but never lead to a confusion as to which heritage he wishes to represent. In other words: as Adorno was a continental European philosopher, we would need to look for a British antagonist who is as British as a Briton can be. Furthermore, his theses should outlive the moment in which they were stated; however, it should not be mandatory that our candidate be dead.

One particular aspect of his personality, however, overshadows the aforesaid variables: his utterances and his aesthetical and moral values should be of such significance that others, no matter if they are young or old, are willing to take them on. It would, of course, be outrageous to expect that the candidate under consideration had already developed or named a certain school, such as Adorno's famous sociological Frankfurt School. But his stature must at least qualify him for such an occurrence.

Adorno has been, and remains, a point of lively discussion within musicology. But before we look at one particular prejudice Adorno still has to face, we need to keep in mind that Adorno operated in a completely different environment, at least in regards to the general idea about what musicology is. Nicholas Cook has clearly outlined in his 1999 article *What is musicology?* that Britain's concept of musicology is

often more far-reaching than the continental European one – and when it comes to the United States, it becomes even more ambiguous: »Whereas in Britain any academic who writes about music is a musicologist, in America the term specifically means music historians: people who write about the music of the past.«¹

It would surely be a misunderstanding to classify Adorno as the typical German »Musikwissenschaftler«², even if this stereotype is already a simplification. The discipline itself as we know it today would, further, not be equivalent to the type of musicology Adorno encountered in the first half of the 20th century. Nonetheless, it remains an interesting side-issue that he, more or less, viewed the representatives of this discipline critically; in *Kritik des Musikanten*, he argues in light of the emerging youth music of the *Singbewegung* that there is a type of

Musikwissenschaft, die, an den eigentlichen Kompositionsproblemen bis auf wenige Ausnahmen recht desinteressiert, dürftige Leistungen sogenannter kleiner Meister, die keine sind, mit demselben Ernst behandelt wie die authentischen Werke, und jene womöglich noch vorzieht, weil über sie noch nicht soviel gearbeitet worden sei. Hinzu tritt das Bedürfnis, obsoleete Produkte wieder zu beleben, um mit den Schatzkammern der Kunstgeschichte konkurrieren zu können.³

An often named prejudice in Adorno's case is that his writings are full of highly subjective ratings of composers, presented in a non-academic manner, without citations or proof⁴, and put into the context of an almost immanent *Kulturkampf*, in which the Schönberg faction always wins and is superior to the Hindemithians and Stravinskians. Adorno's preference for the Schönberg School is obvious; further, it is

- 1 Cook, *What is musicology?* Cook also refers in detail to Joseph Kerman's 1985 published *Contemplating Music. Challenges to Musicology* in order to highlight the differences between the American and the British musicology movements.
- 2 I am most grateful to Jan Philipp Sprick for raising the question during the concluding discussion of my paper at the Graz GMTH conference 2008 to what extent it would be appropriate to label Adorno a musicologist at all. It is indeed still a – perhaps unsolvable – dilemma of the musicological and music-theoretical community that the moment a researcher or a writer discusses a music-related or particular music-aesthetical topic, there is an immediate tendency to assign the author to a suitable academic pigeon-hole. In the case of Adorno, I here refer to the attribute »musicologist« in a much broader sense, which Guido Adler's original 1885 concept of musicology would point to: since Adorno is decidedly and purposely discussing musicological problems, this at least partially implies that one can view him from the perspective of a musicologist. Similar to the British candidates for British Adornian counterparts I am going to discuss in the following, Adorno can be regarded as one of the few universal scholars of the 20th century. For a deeper perspective on possible challenges facing musicology as a discipline musicology cf. Kerman, *Contemplating Music*, pp. 60ff.
- 3 Adorno, *Kritik des Musikanten*, p. 78.
- 4 Particularly illuminating in this context is Diether de la Motte's criticism. He does not question Adorno's elaborate skills in analyzing musical contexts – on the contrary, though, he criticizes Adorno's methodology: »Analytisches Handwerkszeug steht aber jedem Analysehandwerker zu Gebote. Der Analytiker des hohen Niveaus aber [...] bedarf des Einfalls. Wann aber zündet der Einfall in diesem »kompositorischen Prozess« schöpferischer Analyse? Für mich ist deutlich, dass er bei Adorno im Musikhören zündete. [...] Adornos offenbar höchst entwickelte und auf breiter Basis phänomenaler Literaturkenntnis erwachsene Hörkultur ermöglichte ihm im Hören die entscheidenden Funde, die Fähigkeit, die künstlerische Essenz von Musik beim Namen zu nennen. Und für der Analyse anderen Teil, den Nachweis am Notentext, fehlte ihm wohl der leidenschaftliche Antrieb [...]. Notentextanalysen von suchend Findenden können faszinierende und erhellende Lektüre sein. Bei Adorno sind sie Pflichtübung, dem für ihn Wesentlichen lustlos, uninspiriert nachgereicht, inhaltlich – liest man sie allein – fehlerhaft, schematisch.« (de la Motte, *Adornos musikalische Analysen*, p. 110.)

undeniable that in some instances he casually carried his unfair criticism too far as, for example, in the case of his gloss on Jean Sibelius, describing Sibelius' qualities and faith as follows:

Der Erfolg von Sibelius ist ein Störungssymptom des musikalischen Bewußtseins. Das Erdbeben, das in den Dissonanzen der großen neuen Musik seinen Ausdruck fand, hat die altmodische kleine nicht verschont. Sie ist rissig und schief geworden. Aber während man vor den Dissonanzen flüchtet, hat man bei den falschen Dreiklängen Zuflucht gesucht. Die falschen Dreiklänge: Strawinsky hat sie auskomponiert. Er hat durch hinzugesetzte falsche Noten demonstriert, wie falsch die richtigen geworden sind. Bei Sibelius klingen schon die reinen falsch. Er ist ein Strawinsky wider Willen. Nur hat er weniger Talent.

Davon wollen seine Anhänger nichts wissen. [...] Das Triviale gilt fürs Ursprüngliche, das Unartikulierte für den Laut der bewußtlosen Schöpfung.

Kategorien solcher Art weichen der Kritik aus. Daß die Naturstimmung ans ehrfürchtige Schweigen gebunden sei, ist die herrschende Überzeugung. Aber wenn der Begriff der Naturstimmung schon in der Realität nicht unbefragt passieren dürfte, dann gewiß nicht in Kunstwerken. Symphonien sind keine tausend Seen: auch wenn sie tausend Löcher haben.⁵

Nonetheless, the allegation of unacademic behaviour is unfounded. We need to understand Adorno's context as a scholar of the early 20th century. The footnote, introduced into the scholarly community by the German historian Leopold von Ranke, was at first glance, an immense advancement. But Ranke himself, as clearly underscored by Anthony Grafton's 1999 superb study *The Footnote. A Curious History*, misused it, on the one hand by taking the footnote as an arena for unfair criticism of his academic competitors, and on the other hand by leading it into absurdity through proofing and referencing virtually everything.⁶ That Adorno prefers complex but clear prose, using endnotes just for brief descriptions, and stating his opinion directly in the main body, should be seen as a clear counter-reaction to the over-loaded German academic style that existed when he was writing his first papers.

All these variables should be taken into consideration, when we now propose the possible British candidates. A first candidate could perhaps be Hans Keller. Although Austrian-born, he immigrated to Britain in 1938 following the »Anschluss« of Austria to Nazi-Germany and later naturalized as a British citizen. Initially a violinist, he became one of the most prominent moderators and officials of the British Broadcasting Service, the BBC, holding various senior positions. Until his influence waned slightly when William Glock took over the position of the BBC Controller of Music during the mid 1960s⁷, he was also one of the major musicologists. He focussed on the Viennese and German classics, such as Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, and was a vigorous advocate for Arnold Schönberg and Benjamin Britten. He was also famous for introducing *Functional Analysis*, a method vehemently prominent in 1950s BBC programmes. In this method, neither spoken analysis nor written commentary, was used to describe the overall mastery and syntactical unity of a musical piece; the pieces were performed and broadcast on radio without any

5 Adorno, *Glosse über Sibelius*, p. 249.

6 Grafton, *The Footnote*, pp. 62–93.

7 For a detailed discussion of Keller as a political issue within the history of the BBC and his personal conflict with William Glock, cf. Garnham, *Hans Keller and the BBC*, pp. 115–120 and particularly pp. 149ff.

announcement or analysis. They were »wordless«, so to speak, and often slightly modified in order to focus on the listener and make clear to him the background and foreground immanent in the music.⁸ Hans Keller's writings⁹ encompass a large collection of aesthetical and music-theory-related articles on composers, diverse musical genres – Keller has produced an immense output on film music theory – and his own compositions.

Thus, on the surface, much argues in favour of naming him a British Adorno. Critics of this conclusion would perhaps argue that Keller's interests, as expressed in his writings, appear at first sight limited to music; indeed, in this respect he clearly differed from Adorno. However, Keller discusses not only composers and single compositions; his essays also cover concepts of music psychology, as in his 1971 article *Music and Psychopathology*.¹⁰

Is he the British figure we are searching for? I believe he is not, although the idea of viewing Keller as a British antagonist to Adorno is tempting. However there is one reason why we, unfortunately, have to reject this idea, at least partially. Although Keller was in a position for a long time to actively promote certain composers, as underscored by his open preference for Benjamin Britten, whom he often described as »masterly«¹¹, he neither stands for a particular school, nor has he tried to become a moral authority. Adorno's influence is grounded in his particular situation as professor of philosophy, both in the United States and in particular in Frankfurt after World War II. His decision to move back to Germany was rooted in the belief that his moral authority was needed to build a new and better Germany, and that he had to shape the new generation. This background also sheds new light on Adorno's lectures at the *Darmstädter Ferienkurse für Neue Musik*. Although Keller had, at least in the eyes of some of his BBC colleagues, become more British than a Briton, his impact on the emerging generation of British composers was limited. Further, Keller's criticism took a more passive form, as underscored by his 1978 article *The State of the Symphony: not only Maxwell Davies's*. Keller did not intend to support or even initiate a new movement of symphonic writing; instead he acted from the very secure position of a harsh critic.¹² His influence on British composers must be regarded in this context as marginal.

Allow me now to introduce a second candidate, maybe quite a surprising name in some ears: Roger Scruton. Roger Vernon Scruton, born 1944, is a British philosopher, writer and composer. Particularly known for his conservative, but sometimes extremely radical views in politics and culture – he strongly opposed the EU mem-

8 Cf. Keller, *Funktionsanalyse*.

9 Keller, *Essays on Music*.

10 Keller, *Music and Psychopathology*.

11 Despite the fact that Keller must be regarded as a keen and skilled analyst of musical structures, his personal admiration of Britten as a composer is further underscored by his very close friendship with Britten. Naturally in such cases, there is always a danger of losing one's critical distance towards the object of research; at least up to a certain extent, this failure is prominent in Keller's 1979 essay *Britten's Last Masterpiece*.

12 One passage in the mentioned article is particularly notable because of its negative pluralis majestatis duct: »[W]e know now why we have to regard Davies's Symphony as »problematic«, and why we may allow ourselves to call it »uneven«: evenness would imply symphonic sense throughout.« (Keller, *The State of the Symphony*, p. 110).

bership of Britain and is a radical supporter of fox hunting, the latter underscored by his books *On Hunting* (1998) and *Animals Rights and Wrongs* (2006) –, he is indeed one of the most active thinkers in the UK.

Moreover, he is, in his own words, an amateur composer of many chamber works and two full operas, *The Minister* (1994) and *Violet* (2005). The »requirements« I formulated at the outset are thus fulfilled; the fact that Scruton intends to play an active role in moral questions facing British society supports my thesis especially well. But is this enough to dub him a British Adorno?

His main contributions to the field of musicology have been his books *The Aesthetics of Music* (1997) and *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde* (2004). The first book, in particular, is a very successful attempt at combining philosophical outlooks in the tradition of Kant and Schopenhauer with clear music analysis. Scruton does not choose the easy path of simply annotating his philosophical ponderings with musical examples. Instead, he wishes to underscore the symbiosis between aesthetic ideas and the ways in which they can be realized in musical compositions. Written in a very elegant and eloquent style, as the majority of academic reviewers have stated¹³, his thesis on musical development, form and tonality often contains very provocative statements. He strongly opposes any form of Schenkerian analysis; he opposes Allen Forte's pitch-class set analysis and questions whether it really corresponds to the way in which we perceive music.

In absolute contrast to Adorno, however, who always argued for free (and dodecaphonic) atonality as the appropriate artistic means in our society, Scruton adopts a counter-position.¹⁴ He questions whether atonal music can produce the characteristic features of tonal organisation and remains sceptical, in particular, about serially organized music.

When we hear *movements* in atonal music, it is precisely *not* the serial ordering that we are hearing. [...] In other words, the »grouping« required by serial organization forbids the experience of musical movement, as we know it. We are to hear the music as *sounds*, rather than tones, exhibiting an acoustical, rather than a musical, order. [...] [W]e strive to organize it in the usual way, to hear themes, motifs, melodies, rather than »configurations«; harmonies rather than »simultaneities«.¹⁵ [T]he constraints implied by the serial order are musically arbitrary. The listener will depend upon the expectations established by tonality [...]. In particular, he will be relying on the tonal implications of the ascending and descending semitone – the perceived character of *leaning* that these intervals derive from the tradition of tonal harmony.¹⁶

Scruton's opposition to Adorno's axioms is not what counts here; the quoted passage appears as the golden thread which runs through Scruton's entire aesthetics of music. It will be defended against everything and becomes almost a dogma that the reader must accept if he wants to follow Scruton's line of argument. The inten-

13 Cf. reviews by Buhler, *Review Roger Scruton*, Levinson (*Philosophical Review*) or Denham, *The Moving Mirrors of Music*.

14 His positions regarding tonality versus atonality, outlined in the 1997 published book *The Aesthetics of Music*, remain virtually unchanged until today. His general preference for tonality and a praise for a »revival of tonality« is again stressed in Scruton, *Culture Counts*, pp. 89–95.

15 Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, p. 304.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 305.

sity with which Scruton adopts a position that is in clear opposition to Adorno leads to an absurd situation: in his own way, he has become an Adornian *par excellence*.

In *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde*, Scruton follows a methodological approach similar to the one Adorno used in his *Versuch über Wagner*. Subdivided in clear chapters that apparently focus on generalized topics such as »The Story of Tristan«, »The Philosophy of Love« or »Love, Death and Redemption«¹⁷, his proposed aims are to

explore one of Wagner's majestic attempts to articulate the idea of redemption in artistic and dramatic form. And I shall examine the origin of all such ideals in the peculiar metaphysical predicament of human beings when they come face to face with their incarnation and know themselves simultaneously as both determined and free.¹⁸

Just as it had been central for Adorno, Scruton identifies myth as one of the key subjects in Wagner's aesthetics. In his view, Wagner comprehends myth as a »form of social hope«¹⁹ in a world of »sacred things«²⁰: since myths speak of what is eternal, they are not merely reminiscences of the past, but ideals for which to strive.²¹

But in contrast to Scruton's eminent and strictly positive appraisal of Wagner's use of the leitmotif technique in *Tristan und Isolde* – he devotes a great part of his book to strict leitmotif-analysis, even appending a table of motifs at the very end of the book – Adorno explicitly contradicts the idea that Wagner's use of leitmotifs enhances the overall sense of musical unity and formal coherence; in his eyes, the original Berliozian *idée fixe* is turned into absurdity and becomes the representation of rigour:

In der Götterdämmerung, wo der dynamische Kompositionsstil auf ein älteres Motivmaterial von größter allegorischer Sprödigkeit angewandt wird, liegt der Widerspruch offen zutage. Während das Leitmotiv gerade der metaphysischen Absicht der Musikdramen dienen soll, wird es, endliches Zeichen vorgeblich unendlicher Ideen, zu deren eigenem Feind: im Schoß der Wagnerschen Spätromantik wächst ein positivistisches Element heran, ganz ähnlich wie Schopenhauers Metaphysik den Kantischen Idealismus positivistisch-naturwissenschaftlich umfunktionierte. Schon zu Wagners Zeit hat das Publikum die Leitmotive krud auf die Personen bezogen, die sie charakterisieren, eben weil sie mit den geistigen Bedeutungen nicht unmittelbar verschmolzen sind, mit denen eins zu sein sie doch vorgeben: die Notwendigkeit der Kommentare war stets schon die Bankrotterklärung von Wagners eigener Ästhetik des unmittelbar Einen. Der Verfall des Leitmotivs ist diesem immanent: er führt über die geschmeidige Illustrationstechnik von Richard Strauss geradeswegs zur Kinomusik, wo das Leitmotiv einzig noch Helden oder Situationen anmeldet, damit sich der Zuschauer rascher zurechtfindet.

Allegorische Starre hat das Motiv gleich einer Krankheit befallen.²²

17 Bearing in mind the Adornian chapter headings in *Versuch über Wagner* such as »Klang«, »Farbe« or »Phantasmagorie«, Scruton has virtually absorbed Adornian qualities.

18 Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart*, p. 3.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

21 Cf. in this context Adorno's statement on the role of myth in relation to the continuity of history: »Indem er die Verfangenheit des eigenen Zustands im Weltgrund aufsucht, stellt ein Einverständnis sich her zwischen der Gegenwart und dem Mythos. Nicht als bloße Metaphern hat Wagner die Mythen zitiert: unter seinem Blick wird alles mythologisch und ganz gewiß der einzige neuzeitliche Stoff, den er bearbeitete.« (Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, pp. 114f.)

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 44f.

But is Adorno's interpretation justified, at least from a methodological standpoint? This characteristically Adornian trait – the tendency of stating philosophical ponderings in such an apodictic way that the reader is constrained to either accept them as truth or reject them without additional justification – is visible in Scruton's writings on the aesthetics of music, too. Here, we are often confronted with sudden generalizations such as »at almost every point in the opera it is possible to identify a tonal center«²³ or even »in Wagner a dissonance is almost always resolved.«²⁴ Equally, Scruton keeps insisting, taking up a thread from his *Aesthetics of Music*, that tonality can be described as essentially grammatical, a language »in which each harmonic event is experienced as fully determined by the one that precedes it and as fully determining the next.«²⁵ These are conclusions that damage Scruton's credibility.

In conclusion, I regret that we haven't yet identified a clearcut British Adorno. This does not have anything to do with the behaviour of the two afore-mentioned candidates, as other candidates would always fulfil certain aspects of my model. But, the search was not wholly unsuccessful. In contrast, it reveals one constant in the development of British twentieth- and twenty-first-century music. What my initial model lacked was the following aspect: it did not take into account the question of why British contemporary art music has never developed an intrinsic desire for a British Adorno. Viewed from the sometimes superficial perspective of the continent, British contemporary music after World War II showed little real progress, at least in terms of Adorno's dictum concerning the barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz: »nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch.«²⁶ But the picture in Britain is much more multi-faceted, as even Ulrich Dibelius's superficial summary in his *Moderne Musik nach 1945* suggests: »Dies wäre also eins der Charakteristika englischer Musik: ein gewisser Konservatismus, der aber keineswegs verstockt oder rückständig zu sein braucht, sondern eher als Regulativ gegenüber forcierter Modernität wirkt und zu einiger stilistischer Unbefangenheit erzieht.«²⁷

I suggest that the state of multiple styles in contemporary music that we experience worldwide today, was already present in Britain during the 1960s, at least to a certain extent. Musical reminiscences of the past, as demonstrated in the works of Malcolm Arnold or Arnold Bax, never lost their influence, and even representatives of the so-called Manchester School, in particular Peter Maxwell Davies, demonstrate that the clear-cut situation in Germany after World War II has not provided suitable pigeon holes for any British composer.

Whether someday a particular British Adornian »godfather«, who represents moral authority for a whole generation, will emerge, seems doubtful, particularly in the globalized world today. But even without such an Adornian godfather, there remains a need in British contemporary music for a critical and even moral stance; from that perspective, looking back at Adorno's writings can only be considered »helpful«.

23 Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart*, p. 79.

24 Ibid., p. 83.

25 Ibid., p. 84.

26 Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, p. 30.

27 Dibelius, *Moderne Musik*, p. 292.

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Hochschule für Musik, Theater und Medien Hannover [Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media]

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