

Article

The Possibility of Originality in Music Composition

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the tension between freedom and norms in music composition by integrating the theoretical perspectives of Immanuel Kant and Theodor Adorno. Kant's aesthetic philosophy highlights the concept of free play, wherein the imagination and understanding interact dynamically to produce originality, guided by intuitive genius rather than rigid adherence to pre-existing rules. Adorno's critical theory, in contrast, situates artistic production within socio-economic structures, revealing how the culture industry enforces standardization and pseudo-individualization, thereby limiting artistic autonomy. By juxtaposing these frameworks, this study demonstrates that originality emerges from a dynamic interplay between structural constraints and creative freedom. Free imagination requires foundational rules to operate effectively, while rules themselves evolve through creative practice. Ultimately, genuine artistic creation combines aesthetic autonomy with social-critical awareness, reconciling the demands of internal artistic logic and external socio-cultural conditions.

Keywords: artistic autonomy; originality; culture industry; free play; Kantian aesthetics; Adorno; music composition; creativity and norms

1. Introduction

The creation of music is often associated or romanticized as a medium of free expression. However, the process of music creation is often met with many constraints in the creation such as the tradition within genres, market preferences/mechanisms, or even theoretical rules. As Theodore Adorno has pointed out, the cultural products of the culture industry in a mass society are often produced in a rationalized and standardized manner. These cultural products, shaped by instrumental reason, tend to reproduce and reinforce the existing social order, blurring the boundaries between cultural production and lived reality. This could lead to the space for freedom and innovation to be somewhat limited. This tension between ideal and reality will result in the question: Is it truly possible to gain originality within the existing social and cultural norms?

This paper will attempt to critically analyze the above question by mainly drawing on the works of Theodore Adorno, and Immanuel Kant. Adorno's critical theory will lay the analytical foundation of this paper. He argues that although works of art often pursue autonomy, under the conditions of a capitalist-influenced industry, this autonomy is both necessary and illusory. Another important source for this essay is Kant's aesthetic theory. In the Critique of Judgment Kant argues that the appreciation of beauty depends on the free play of imagination and comprehension. Kant does not refer to freedom as a random state without rules, rather a state of mind that the imagination operates actively within the framework of rationality prescribed by the power of comprehension.

2. Adorno's Culture Industry

In Theodor Adorno's theory of culture industry, he discussed the mechanisms of standardization in the field of popular culture [1]. The most important ideas of his theory are standardization and pseudo-individualization. Standardization in this case refers to

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the phenomenon that popular music is being produced in a pattern at both the macro-structural and detailed levels. Musical production in the cultural industry often leans toward monotony due to standardized formulas. In an abstract sense, this will allow all pop songs to be essentially “the same”. An example of this phenomenon can be demonstrated in the chord progression in most pop songs. Even though pop songs have different “genres”, these genres often share the same common chord progressions; an example will be the I-IV-V-I (tonal chord progression), or a repetitive lead-chorus pattern. However, repetition in music is not inherently negative. Composers like Steve Reich utilized repetition as a means of innovation, and even Schoenberg's most avant-garde works contain recurring structures [2]. The issue lies not with repetition per se, but with the static, formulaic application of it to serve commodification. Adorno points out that these types of songs will generally be considered to be lacking in substantial innovation in the overall framework. In a similar light, pseudo-personalization refers to the addition of minor differences to highly homogeneous musical products in hopes to create an appearance of variety and freedom of choice. However, this form of “individuality” is merely an illusion based on standardization. As Adorno himself pointed out:

“Standardization of song hits makes for obedience, and pseudo-individualization maintains it by making people forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or pre-digested.”.

In other words, pop songs cannot escape uniformity, despite the use of novel musical elements (such as the use of unique vocal characteristics or fancy arrangements). These stylistic variations contribute to an illusion of choice and individuality, though they remain tethered to the standardized structure dictated by market demands. Adorno further clarifies the process of the commodification of music by stating that the culture industry is closely linked to the ideological control of society [3]. The market is largely the driving factor behind the “standards” to what constitutes “popular” through advertising, charts, and other mechanisms to guide the listeners’ states and expectations. In this sense, pop music is more so treated like a commodity. In this sense, the value of the product lies not in its aesthetic or artistic significance, but in its exchange value and commercial benefits. This commodification means that music creation is incorporated into the logic of capital and loses its autonomous pursuit of meaning. Adorno himself describes this phenomenon as such:

“The phenomena with which the sociology of the mass media must be concerned, particularly in America, cannot be separated from standardization, the transformation of artistic creations into consumer goods, and the calculated pseudo-individualization and similar manifestations of what is called *Verdinglichung* — reification — in German. It is matched by a reified, largely manipulable consciousness scarcely capable any longer of spontaneous experience.”

With this phenomenon taking place, Adorno claims that people will gradually lose the ability to appreciate art on their own, slowly becoming passive consumers who respond only to familiar patterns. This standardized method of producing music not only creates an illusion of a “natural” musical language existing; it also could serve an effect that strives to bind the public to the existing cultural order. Therefore, the normalization of pop music reflects the domination of the capitalist market over the cultural sphere, and it functions to paralyze critical consciousness and preserve social relations [4]. In this case, the music listener is trained to “automate” their understanding of music by being subjected to a large and constant barrage of “music” disguised as cultural products and will eventually lose the ability to question and critique reality (Adorno Culture Industry Reconsidered).

3. Adorno’s Artistic Autonomy

In order to counteract the homogenization of art by the culture industry, Adorno introduces the idea of artistic autonomy. This concept states that, in order for art to be truly

critical, it must be completely free from the utilitarian logic of the market, and not to be dominated by the principle of commodity exchange in form and content. Adorno further states that in order for art to play a critical role in society, the work of art no longer aims at catering to the market, but follows its own laws and truth. Furthermore, although works of art are usually rooted in society, Adorno emphasizes this idea by claiming that art should “criticize society through its own existence”. Here, it can be interpreted that art needs to remain solely close and self-disciplined within its own sphere and not directly serve political propaganda or market profits [5]. In Adorno’s view, art seemingly for the “sake of art” could be a profound force of social resistance, he claims that:

“Art is not only the plenipotentary of a better praxis than that which has to date predominated, but is equally the critique of praxis as the rule of brutal self-preservation at the heart of the status quo and in its service. It gives the lie to production for production’s sake and opts for a form of praxis beyond the spell of labor. Art’s *promesse du bonheur* means not only that hitherto praxis has blocked happiness but that happiness is beyond praxis. The measure of the chasm separating praxis from happiness is taken by the force of negativity in the artwork.”

In other words, it is impossible for art to exist freely from social factors. It can only strive to free itself from the direct economic or political utilitarian purposes, so it can truly reflect reality in its realest form.

In terms of music, Adorno was highly in favor of experimental worlds that refused to cater to market interests because their formal innovations embodied the demand for artistic autonomy. Adorno himself was highly in favor of the modernist musical movement in the 20th century which rejected traditional harmonic pleasures; this highly complex form of music was precisely a form of rebellion against the logic of the market. Modernist music breaks the harmony and predictability of tonal music, making music less of a commodity that can be enjoyed right away, to an aesthetic object that requires the listeners to actively engage in thought in order to understand. Musical pieces within the modernist movement often contain dissonances and non-linear development structures, making them generally less ‘pleasing to the ear’ and unsuitable for use as background entertainment. According to Adorno, the “difficulty” and the “distance” is what formulates a truthful revelation of the reality of society. He himself claims that:

“Artistic expression comports itself mimetically, just as the expression of living creatures is that of pain.”

This shows that the radical formal experimentation of avant-garde music is not completely isolated and without purpose. On the contrary, avant-garde music is rather a necessary price for art, artist, and the listeners to pay to maintain autonomy and thus fulfill its critical function.

However, it must be noted that the autonomy that Adorno is advocating for does not mean that art should escape the influences of society and to be completely within a self-contained bubble; rather, he advocates that art should complete a “mirror critique” of society within its own domain [6]. Art also should be able to imply the lack and denial of a reality through the breaking of the market value category [7-9]. Adorno, in his writings has pointed out that all art that can, must elevate its social-critical powers to the form of the art, removing all the ostensible social didactic content. Thus, allowing for the existence of the art itself to criticize and reflect the reality of society [10]. Adorno uses works of modern authors such as Kafka and Beckett as examples of art that is not directly politically charged. These works are unsettling in form, shaking the inherent attitudes of the audience and provoking deeper reflection than art that is merely propagandistic. This shows the importance of artistic autonomy, art that is formally independent of established norms can carry authentic critical content. Therefore, in Adorno’s view, the social-critical power of art is mainly derived from the autonomy of art, this autonomy makes art a “mirror” of society, creating a reflection of reality through its own forms [7].

4. Comparison of Kant's Freedom of Play

When exploring the relationship between the norms and freedom of creations, in addition to Adorno's views, it is also important to take Kant's philosophy of aesthetics into consideration [8]. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant introduced the concept of free play to explain the relationship between the aesthetic imagination and the rules of reason. According to Kant, when we are introduced to beauty, the imagination and the understanding in the mind enter into a state of free interaction. In this state, the imagination can play around freely and not be bound by specific concepts, understanding, in this case will not impose any definite categories, but only providing an ambiguous sense of order. Hence, this synergistic activity of the two will bring an aesthetic experience that is pleasurable [6]. This concept of free play shows that it is possible to strike a balance of following the rules and completely getting rid of them within creativity [9]. On one hand, the creation of most art is not solely disordered, a sense of purposiveness still exists. However, this purposiveness is not fixed, it lacks a fixed conceptual or utilitarian purpose, these types of works can only be described as "purposiveness art without purpose". Here Kant claims that what one experiences from aesthetic judgment is in a way creative freedom; as the artist is free from established dogma and is presented with the ability to allow imagination and understanding to interact freely to produce forms of art that are both new and appropriate.

Moreover, Kant further outlines the relationship between creation and rules by introducing the concept of the genius [10]. For Kant genius is the ability of "Nature to give rules to art through it". This implies that truly original works of art are not accomplished by following existing rules; rather by relying on the artist's intuitive genius, which takes inspiration from nature to make new rules for art. Kant claims that:

"Genius is a talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition consisting of a skill for something that can be learned by following some rule or other; hence the foremost property of genius must be originality."

This idea suggests that Kant recognizes the need for creativity to transcend old norms—that genius does not create by adhering to established rules but is able to generate rules implicitly in creation. However, such rules are not externally imposed, but are artistic laws that arise spontaneously from the creative process [11]. Thus, in Kant's framework, creativity and rules are not opposites: true creativity, on the one hand, frees itself from the constraints of established rules, and on the other hand, forms a new harmony and order at a higher level, so that the work of art is both new and comprehensible and resonant [6].

In this case, Kant's theory seemingly provides complementary purposes to Adorno's views. Kant provided a theoretical framework regarding artistic creativity, where it requires a certain degree of freedom from the established concepts in order to create a sense of beauty, which is in line of Adorno's claims on the needs for the art to be free from the utilitarian logic in order to retain its critical nature in spirit. In addition, with Kant's concepts of "non-utilitarianism" in aesthetics, it can be said that Kant also laid the foundation for later critical theorists' discussion regarding the utilitarianism in art, where only art goes beyond the direct utilitarian purpose can it be appreciated purely for its formal beauty [12].

On the other hand, Adorno's development also compensated for the limitations of Kant's theory. Kant regarded aesthetic judgment as an expression of universal humanity. However, he had very little consideration regarding the social alienation and power structures of aesthetic taste. Adorno emphasized the need for true artistic freedom to counteract external power and ideological disciplines. However, Kant's framework overlooks the ways in which aesthetic taste and judgment can be conditioned by social and ideological forces. Adorno, in contrast, foregrounds this issue, arguing that true artistic freedom must actively resist these conditions. Taking these two ideologies together, the freedom of artistic creation is reflected both in the dynamic balance between the artists' imagination and the rules, and in the relative independence of art from the utilitarian norms of society.

The combination of the two enables us to realize more comprehensively that the norms and freedoms of art are not simply opposed to each other, and that truly creative art is often a product of confronting external conditions of unfreedom while respecting the laws of art itself, and that it requires both aesthetic conceptual freedom of play and autonomy in the sense of social critique.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this study combines theoretical analysis from two philosophers to explore the tension between freedom and norms in music composition, yielding several important insights. First, originality does not exist in isolation within absolute freedom or pure norms but emerges from the dynamic interplay between the two. While Kant focuses on the internal dynamics of creative judgment, Adorno situates artistic production within broader socio-economic structures. Adorno revealed how the cultural industry suppresses artistic originality through standardized production. His concept of “pseudo-individualization” also suggests that even in highly normative products, superficial variations must be introduced to maintain audience interest — this implies that completely rejecting norms is not a realistic path for popular art, and innovation often emerges as an addition to norms. Kant, from the perspective of aesthetic judgment, points out that beautiful art cannot exist without rule-based elements as essential conditions, while the genius of originality is an indispensable vitality in art. Mechanical conformity and genius innovation together constitute the two sides of artistic creation. Beautiful works always contain certain teachable technical components but never stop at pure imitation. This provides insight into the mechanism of originality's emergence: free imagination requires certain rules as a foundation to function, and rules can only be continuously updated and evolved through the free operation of imagination. Drawing on previous theories, we confirm the thesis stated at the beginning of this paper: originality is a dynamic process that emerges from the tension between freedom and norms. Only by integrating the perspectives of social criticism and aesthetic philosophy can we fully grasp the complexity of this process.

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