“As a temporal art,” Adorno observed, “music is bound to the fact of succession and is hence as irreversible as time itself. By starting it commits itself to carrying on, to becoming something new, to developing. What we may conceive of as musical transcendence, namely, the fact that at any given moment it has become something and something other than it was, that points beyond itself—all that is no mere metaphysical imperative dictated by some external authority. It lies in the nature of music and will not be denied.”

Such remarks serve to remind us once again that Adorno was at once a philosopher and a musicologist: amongst all the members of the Frankfurt School he possessed not only a sociological and social-theoretical awareness of the dialectical relation between music and society, but also an incomparable feel for the inner power of music. Indeed, he thought of philosophy itself in musical terms. Notwithstanding his well-known condemnation of commodified music as one facet of the “culture industry,” his appeal to music’s “transcendence” betrays an enduring belief in the relative autonomy of the musical artwork, the persistence, even, of the “aura” whose dissolution through techniques of mass reproduction his colleague and friend Walter Benjamin welcomed with far less ambivalence. Adorno was a thinker of exact imagination, responsive as a composer to the inner complexities of music no less than he was as a philosopher alive to the inner complexities of philosophical argument. He studied composition with the Viennese modernist composer Alban Berg, and produced a respectable body of musical

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compositions, including an intriguing (unfinished) opera project, Der Schatz des Indianer-Joe, based on the writings of Mark Twain. Of the published complete works no fewer than five volumes are dedicated to musical writings, including monographs on Richard Wagner, Gustav Mahler, his teacher Alban Berg, as well as the notorious Philosophy of New Music, which developed a dialectical comparison between Schoenberg and Stravinsky.

But for Adorno music was not merely an interest and an important aspect of his writing; he argued for a special affinity between critical theory and musical form. Based on music’s complex materiality and the non-referential character of much western concert music, Adorno saw that music had a greater capacity for immanent critique than most other forms of art. Specifically in the compositional procedures of Beethoven’s music, based on gradual motivic development, he found important structural analogies to his own philosophical method. The analogy became especially evident when Adorno turned his attention to what he called the “late style” in Beethoven. With its critical interest in the “cracks and fissures” of society and the unresolved negativity of thought, it could be argued that Adorno’s philosophical work itself came to exemplify a species of late style. “One can no longer compose like Beethoven,” Adorno observed, “but one must think as he composed.”

Both music scholars and philosophers have long been aware of this special relationship in Adorno’s thinking. Important early work on Adorno, above all Martin Jay’s short but influential monograph on Adorno in the “Modern Masters” series (1984), shows a fine understanding of the musical strand of Adorno’s philosophy. Yet it was only with Rose Rosengard Subotnik’s book Developing Variations (1991) that a wider Anglo-American academic audience was introduced to Adorno’s musical thought, which resulted in a veritable slew of publications on Adorno and music over the next decade or so. Not all readers responded with praise. In a famous essay for

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The New York Review of Books, the pianist and musicologist Charles Rosen wrote that Adorno “combined brilliant insights into the phenomena of culture with an essentially fraudulent manipulation of terms to hide the inadequate relation of his theory to historical detail.” Much of Adorno’s writing on music, Rosen continued, “reads like a parody of the only too familiar Philistine picture of the avant-garde tradition as the work of degenerate perverts.” Such venomous lines (with their readiness to leverage prejudices that are ostensibly illegitimate) are not unrepresentative of the polarizing effect of Adorno’s musical-critical legacy. In 2003 the influential classical music reviewer Alex Ross asked provocatively “What happened to German music?” and laid the blame for the current state of contemporary music in Germany, which Ross considers rather dire, squarely on Adorno’s doorstep.

The extreme responses he elicited notwithstanding, it was hardly an accident that Adorno became a central figure in Anglo-American musical thought just before the turn of the millennium. In many ways, Adorno’s aesthetic theory and trenchant social critique provided an answer to the challenge to the field that had been laid down by the late Joseph Kerman in his Contemplating Music (1985), a plea for a critical rather than positivist approach to musicology, and the starting point of what became known as the New Musicology. In the 1990s, there was no way around Adorno—even (or, one might say, especially) in a field as remote from Adorno’s musical tastes as popular music. The zenith of musicology’s embrace of Adorno can perhaps be pinpointed at the huge millennial meeting of the American Musicological Society (along with nine other professional musical associations) in Toronto in 2000, which featured a much-anticipated, star-studded, and predictably explosive special session on Adorno. Never had Adorno seemed so aktuell to so many musicologists.

4 Alex Ross, “Ghost Sonata: What happened to German Music?” The New Yorker (March 24, 2003).
There is an interesting asymmetry in this wave. The publication of the important posthumous works on musical topics, which is still ongoing, only began toward the end of musicology’s fascination with Adorno. As a consequence, important works such as *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (Engl. tr. 1998), the *Theory of Musical Reproduction* (2006), and *Current of Music* (2009) have not been met with as much scholarly interest as they deserve. These writings, based on lecture notes, transcriptions, or, in the case of the Beethoven book, simply a compilation of fragmentary thoughts, offer important insights into some of the key themes in Adorno’s thinking such as, *inter alia*, the sociology of musical genre, the historical transformation of music from the “heroic” or high-bourgeois era to late-modernity, the meaning of both performance and listening in the era of mass-communication, and the specific challenges or deformations of the radio on musical form, a theme which, by extension, implicates many of the digital practices of our own contemporary age.

Perhaps ironically, it is especially the rough and unfinished character of these books that sometimes makes points with greater transparency than the polished and stylized prose of the published works. There is a lot left to discover in these new publications, and they raise again the question of Adorno’s *Aktualität* with renewed vigor. We are therefore pleased to present this special issue on Adorno and Music, which contains essays by some of the foremost musicologists and scholars in the tradition of critical theory.

A concluding note: The following essays were originally presented as papers at a conference on “Adorno: Music and Modernity” at Harvard University (25-26 October, 2013), organized by Peter E. Gordon, Alexander Rehding, and Michael Rosen, and sponsored by the Department of Music, the Center for Jewish Studies, the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, the Harvard Colloquium for Intellectual History, and the Dean of the
Humanities. The editors would like to convey their special thanks for the generous support, and we would also like to express our gratitude once again to Michael Lesley for his organizational genius in keeping a conference of academics from disintegrating into a confused noise.