The Form of the Phonograph Record*

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TRANSLATED BY THOMAS Y. LEVIN

One does not want to accord it any form other than the one it itself exhibits: a black pane made of a composite mass which these days no longer has its honest name any more than automobile fuel is called benzine; fragile like tablets, with a circular label in the middle that still looks most authentic when adorned with the prewar terrier hearkening to his master's voice; at the very center, a little hole that is at times so narrow that one has to redrill it wider so that the record can be laid upon the platter. It is covered with curves, a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing, which here and there forms more plastic figures for reasons that remain obscure to the layman upon listening; structured like a spiral, it ends somewhere in the vicinity of the title label, to which it is sometimes connected by a lead-out groove so that the needle can comfortably finish its trajectory. In terms of its "form," this is all that it will reveal. As perhaps the first of the technological artistic inventions, it already stems from an era that cynically acknowledges the dominance of things over people through the emancipation of technology from human requirements and human needs and through the presentation of achievements whose significance is not primarily humane; instead, the need is initially produced by advertisement, once the thing already exists and is spinning in its own orbit. Nowhere does there arise anything that resembles a form specific to the phonograph record—in the way that one was generated by photography in its early days. Just as the call for "radio-specific" music remained necessarily empty and unfulfilled and gave rise to nothing better than some

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directions for instrumentation that turned out to be impracticable, so too there has never been any gramophone-specific music.[1] Indeed, one ought to credit the phonograph record with the advantage of having been spared the artisanal transfiguration of artistic specificity in the arty private home. Furthermore, from their phonographic origins up through the electrical process (which, for better and for worse, may well be closely related to the photographic process of enlargement), the phonograph records were nothing more than the acoustic photographs that the dog so happily recognizes. It is no coincidence that [in German] the term "plate" is used without any modification and with the same meaning in both photography and phonography.[2] It designates the two-dimensional model of a reality that can be multiplied without limit, displaced both spatially and temporally, and traded on the open market. This, at the price of sacrificing its third dimension: its height and its abyss.

According to every standard of artistic self-esteem, this would imply that the form of the phonograph record was virtually its nonform. The phonograph record is not good for much more than reproducing and storing a music deprived of its best dimension, a music, namely, that was already in existence before the phonograph record and is not significantly altered by it. There has been no development of phonographic composers; even Stravinsky, despite all his good will towards the electric piano, has not made any effort in this direction.[3] The

1. The stakes involved in Adorno's resistance to the possibility of composition specific to what he himself called "the most important of all the musical mass media" are articulated in the opening lines of his essay "On the Musical Employment of Radio":

> In the early 1920s, when radio was becoming generally established, there was much talk of radio-specific music. Such compositions had to be particularly light and transparent since it was held that not only anything massive but also everything complex could only be transmitted badly. Individual acoustic timbres such as the flute would stick out so badly that one would do well to avoid them. On the surface, such rules recalled those contemporary imperatives for both construction and functional forms that did justice to their materials. In truth, however, they ran parallel with the enthusiastic community-oriented slogans calling for simplification that had been launched around the same time in reaction to the alienating aspects of new music.

"Über die musikalische Verwendung des Radios," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 15 (1976), p. 369.

2. In German this linguistic coincidence still resonates clearly since, analogous to the photographic plate, the word for the phonograph record is *Schallplatte* (literally "sound-plate").

3. Stravinsky, whose interest in mechanical musical instruments of all sorts dated back to his childhood, composed a study for pianola in 1917 for the Aeolian Company, London, whose exhibition of pianolas he had seen a few years earlier. This short, barely two-minute-long piece (which the composer orchestrated in 1928 under the title "Madrid" as the last section of his "Quatre Etudes pour Orchestre") was performed on October 13, 1921, in the Aeolian Hall in London and was subsequently published as roll #T-967B. In 1923, the year he signed a six-year contract with Pleyel in Paris to record his entire corpus on pianola rolls, Stravinsky also wrote an early instrumentation of "Les Noces" for two cymbalons, harmonium, pianola, and drums. In a statement entitled "My

only thing that can characterize gramophone music is the inevitable brevity dictated by the size of the vinyl plate. Here too a pure identity reigns between the form of the record disc and that of the world in which it plays: the hours of domestic existence that while themselves away along with the record are too sparse for the first movement of the Eroica to be allowed to unfold without interruption. Dances composed of dull repetitions are more congenial to these hours. One can turn them off at any point. The phonograph record is an object of that "daily need" which is the very antithesis of the humane and the artistic, since the latter can not be repeated and turned on at will but remain tied to their place and time.

Nevertheless, as an article, the record is already too old not to present us with its riddles, once one forgoes considering it as an art object and explores instead the contours of its thingness. For it is not in the play of the gramophone as a surrogate for music but rather in the phonograph record as a thing that its potential significance—and also its aesthetic significance—resides. As an artistic product of decline, it is the first means of musical presentation that can be possessed as a thing. Not like oil paintings, which look down from the walls upon the living. Just as these can hardly fit any more in an apartment, there are no truly large-format phonograph records. Instead, records are possessed like photographs; the nineteenth century had good reasons for coming up with phonograph record albums alongside photographic and postage-stamp albums, all of them herbaria of artificial life that are present in the smallest space and ready to conjure up every recollection that would otherwise be mercilessly shredded between the haste and hum-drum of private life. Through the phonograph record, *time* gains a new approach to music. It is not the time in which music happens, nor is it the time which music monumentalizes by means of its "style." It is time as evanescence, enduring in mute music. If the "modernity" of all mechanical instruments gives music an age-old appearance—as if, in the rigidity of its repetitions, it had existed for ever, having been submitted to the pitiless eternity of the clockwork—then the evanescence and recollection that is associated with the barrel organ as a mere sound in a compelling yet indeterminate way has become tangible and manifest through the gramophone records.

Position on the Phonograph Record," published in 1930, Stravinsky calls not only for recording practices that take advantage of the plastic capabilities of phonographic reproduction, as the composer claims to have done in his records for the Columbia label; he also insists that "it would be of the greatest interest to produce music specifically for phonographic reproduction, a music which would only attain its true image—its original sound—through the mechanical reproduction. This is probably the ultimate goal for the gramophonic composer of the future" (Igor Stravinsky, "Meine Stellung zur Schallplatte," *Kultur und Schallplatte* 9 [1930], cited in *Musik und Gesellschaft*, vol. 1, no. 8 [1931], p. 32).

The key to the proper understanding of the phonograph records ought to be provided by the comprehension of those technological developments that at one point transformed the drums of the mechanical music boxes and organs into the mechanism of the phonograph. If at some later point, instead of doing "history of ideas" [*Geistesgeschichte*], one were to read the state of the cultural spirit [*Geist*] off of the sundial of human technology, then the prehistory of the gramophone could take on an importance that might eclipse that of many a famous composer.[4] There is no doubt that, as music is removed by the phonograph record from the realm of live production and from the imperative of artistic activity and becomes petrified, it absorbs into itself, in this process of petrification, the very life that would otherwise vanish. The dead art rescues the ephemeral and perishing art as the only one alive. Therein may lie the phonograph record's most profound justification, which cannot be impugned by an aesthetic objection to its reification. For this justification reestablishes by the very means of reification an age-old, submerged and yet warranted relationship: that between music and *writing*.

Anyone who has ever recognized the steadily growing compulsion that, at least during the last fifty years, both musical notation and the configuration of the musical score have imposed on compositions—(the pejorative expression "paper music" betrays this drastically)—will not be surprised if one day a reversal of the following sort occurs: music, previously conveyed by writing, suddenly itself turns into writing. This occurs at the price of its immediacy, yet with the hope that, once fixed in this way, it will some day become readable as the "last remaining universal language since the construction of the tower,"[5] a language whose determined yet encrypted expressions are contained in each of its "phrases."[6] If, however, notes were still the mere signs for music, then, through the curves of the needle on the phonograph record, music approaches decisively its true character as writing. Decisively, because this writing can be recognized as true language to the extent that it relinquishes its being as mere signs: inseparably committed to the sound that inhabits this and no other acoustic groove. If the productive force of music has expired in the phonograph records, if the latter have not produced a form through their technology, they instead

4. As early as the mid-1920s, articles discussing the prehistory of the gramophone were in fact being published in increasing number in the more progressive music journals of the time: see, for example, H. H. Stuckenschmidt, "Maschinenmusik," *Der Auftakt*, vol. 7, no. 7/8 (1927), pp. 152–56; K. Marx, "Schallplatten-Geschichte," *Der Auftakt*, vol. 10, no. 11 (1930), pp. 241–43; and Günther Ziegler, "Musikautomaten," *Der Auftakt*, vol. 13, no. 9/10 (1933), pp. 131–33.

5. See Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in vol. 1 of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), p. 387; translated by John Osborne as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 214; translation slightly modified.

6. A play on the German word *Satz*, which means "phrase" and—in a musical context—the "movement" of a composition.

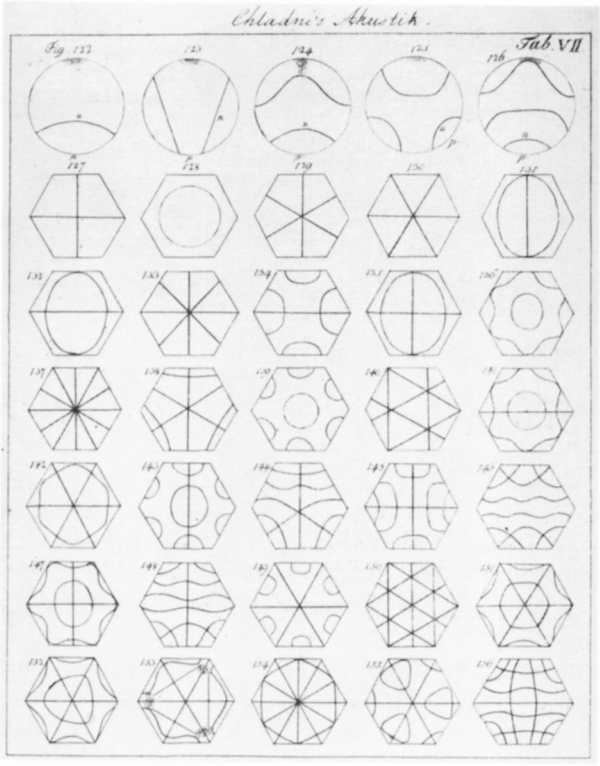
transform the most recent sound of old feelings into an archaic text of knowledge to come. Yet though the theologian may feel constrained to come to the conclusion that "life" in the strictest sense—the birth and death of creatures—cannot be ascribed to any art, he may also tend to hold that the truth-content of art only arises to the extent that the appearance of liveliness has abandoned it; that artworks only become "true," fragments of the true language, once life has left them; perhaps even only through their decline and that of art itself. It would be then that, in a seriousness hard to measure, the form of the phonograph record could find its true meaning: the scriptal spiral that disappears in the center, in the opening of the middle, but in return survives in time.

A good part of this is due to physics, at least to Chladni's sound figures,[7] to which—according to the discovery of one of the most important contemporary aesthetic theorists—Johann Wilhelm Ritter referred as the script-like Ur-images of sound.[8] The most recent technological development has, in any case, continued what was begun there: the possibility of inscribing music without it ever having sounded has simultaneously reified it in an even more inhuman manner and also brought it mysteriously closer to the character of writing and language.[9] The panicked fear that certain composers express regarding this invention cap-

7. Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni (1756–1827), a German physicist often called the "father of acoustics" for his pioneering studies of the transmission of sound. The first to examine sound waves mathematically—as in his 1802 study entitled *Die Akustik* published in Leipzig by Breitkopf und Hertel—Chladni experimented with vibrating plates of thin glass and metal covered with sand, noting that the sand remained in curved lines at the points where the plates did not quiver. These symmetrical patterns, the so-called Chladni figures, attracted popular attention, and in 1809 a demonstration was staged for Napoleon. In 1790 Chladni invented a musical instrument called the "euphonium," which was composed of glass rods and steel bars made to sound through rubbing with moistened fingers. Along with its contemporary, the "aiuton," invented by Charles Clagget, the euphonium was the first of numerous friction bar instruments, some with piano keyboards and horizontal friction cylinders or cones that acted on vertical bars, and others with bars stroked by the player's fingers or with a bow. For more on Chladni, see Mary Desiree Waller, *Chladni Figures: A Study in Symmetry* (London: G. Bell, 1961).

8. The German physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter (1776–1810), often called the "father of electrochemistry," is credited with the discovery in 1801 of the ultraviolet region of the spectrum and in 1803 of the polarization of electrodes in batteries. Adorno here extends a concealed compliment to Walter Benjamin, who reviewed Ritter's treatment of Chladni in the *Origin of the German Tragic Drama.* For further remarks on Ritter by Benjamin, see the introductory note to Ritter's letter to Franz von Baader included in Benjamin's epistolary compilation *Deutsche Menschen* (1936), in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, pp. 176–77. For Ritter's discussion of Chladni, see Johann Wilhelm Ritter, *Fragmente aus dem Nachlasse eines jungen Physikers: Ein Taschenbuch für Freunde der Natur*, ed. J. W. Ritter [Editorship fictitious], vol. 2 (Heidelberg: Mohr und Zimmer, 1810), pp. 227ff. For a detailed study of Ritter, see Walter D. Wetzels, *Johann Wilhelm Ritter: Physik im Wirkungsfeld der deutschen Romantik* (Berlin/New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1973).

9. Adorno here is most likely referring to the more recent variations on the possibility of composing for mechanical pianos by inscribing directly upon the scrolls. This had been demonstrated as early as 1926 at a "Festival of Mechanical Music" in Donaueschingen where Ernst Toch and Gerhard Münch had composed pieces in this manner for a Welte-Mignon pianola. These works were "performed" by Paul Hindemith (who serviced the machine) together with a similarly generated work by Hindemith that served as an accompaniment to Oskar Schlemmer's "Triadic Ballet." See



tures precisely the extraordinary threat to the life of artworks that emanates from it just as it already did from the gentler barbarism of the phonograph record albums. What may be announcing itself here, however, is the shock at that transfiguration of all truth of artworks that iridescently discloses itself in the catastrophic technological progress. Ultimately the phonograph records are not artworks but the black seals on the missives that are rushing towards us from all sides in the traffic with technology; missives whose formulations capture the sounds of creation, the first and the last sounds, judgment upon life and message about that which may come thereafter.

Dr. Erich Steinhard, "Donaueschingen: Mechanisches Musikfest," *Der Auftakt,* vol. 6, no. 8 (1926), pp. 183–86; on the history of the pianola, see Peter Hagmann, *Das Welte-Mignon-Klavier, die Welte-Philharmonie-Orgel und die Anfänge der Reproduktion von Musik,* (Bern/Frankfurt/New York: Peter Lang, 1984). In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the music journals were regularly reporting on a host of newly "invented," largely electric instruments such as Theremin's "Ätherwellenapparat," Dr. Friedrich Trautwein's "Trautonium," Helberger's "Hellerton," and Jörg Mager's "Sphärophon": see, for example, Herbert Weisskopf, "Sphärophon: Das Instrument der Zukunft," *Der Auftakt,* vol. 6, no. 8 (1926), pp. 177–78; Hans Kuznitzky, "Neue Elemente der Musikerzeugung,"*Melos* 6 (April 1927), pp. 156–60; Frank Warschauer, "Neue Möglichkeiten elektrischer Klangerzeugung," *Der Auftakt,* vol. 10, no. 11 (1930), pp. 233–35; and Edwin Geist, "Bedeutung und Aufgabe der elektrischen Musikinstrumente," *Melos* 12 (February 1933), pp. 49–52.

Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni. Tone figures from Die Akustik. *1802.*