

Musical and Monetary *Vermittlung*:

Trust, Coherence, and Adorno's Critique

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Abstract

This article develops a conceptual framework for analysing relations between music and economic instability through Theodor W. Adorno's concept of *Vermittlung*, often translated as mediation. Here, *Vermittlung* does not denote mediation in an instrumental or technical sense, but a historically produced process through which relations become intelligible, binding, and socially credible. In Adorno's account, tonality provides a paradigmatic example: it once functioned as a stabilising mediating structure that organised musical relations, enabled expectation, and secured coherence through historically sedimented trust in its conventions. By the early twentieth century, however, this mediating function becomes historically depleted. Tonal forms do not disappear, but persist as residual conventions whose authority can no longer be taken for granted, producing effects of banality and obsolescence. Following Adorno's negative dialectics, mediation is thus not conceived as a process of reconciliation, but as one that exposes its own limits through non-identity and residue. Musical organisation becomes a site where the fragility of mediation itself becomes perceptible.

Adorno articulates this condition through his comparison of triadic harmony with money in circulation, invoking the image of a counterfeit coin (*Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Hullot-Kentor, 1949/2006, 179). This comparison is not intended as an economic theory, but as a diagnostic metaphor that reveals a shared logic of mediation. Abstract forms can continue to circulate even after the historical conditions that once secured their mediating credibility have eroded, but without fulfilling the binding role for which they were originally constituted. In this sense, both music and money appear as mediated systems whose coherence depends not merely on subjective trust, but on historically produced credibility, social recognition, and institutional validity. When this mediating credibility weakens, coherence does not collapse outright, but persists in distorted or opaque forms. In economic contexts, this becomes visible, for example, in periods of inflation, when money continues to circulate while progressively losing its capacity to function as a stable medium of exchange or store of value. Analogously, musical forms such as the triad may persist after their mediating function has been exhausted, producing effects of banality rather than coherence. Without positing causal relations or normative hierarchies between economic and musical domains, this article proposes a comparative perspective in which musical organisation serves as a sensitive site for registering transformations in mediation and trust, establishing a conceptual foundation for further comparative and quantitative analyses of music and economic instability.

1. Introduction: *Vermittlung* across German Critical Thought: From Hegelian Dialectics to Marxian Critique and Adorno's Music Theory

Periods of social and economic instability often coincide with moments in which established forms of musical coherence lose their self-evidence. For Theodor W. Adorno, this loss is not merely

stylistic, but signals the historical exhaustion of *Vermittlung*, mediation¹: the mediating structures that once secured intelligibility and continuity within musical material.

“Triadic harmonies are to be compared with expressions of everyday language and even more with money in circulation. Their abstractness enables them to intervene omnipresently in a mediating function, and their crisis is linked profoundly with that of all mediating functions in the contemporary situation. Berg’s allegorical music drama touches on this. In *Wozzeck* as well as in *Lulu*, the C-major triad occurs— in contexts that are otherwise remote from tonality—whenever the issue is money. The effect is that of both patent banality and obsolescence. The small-change C-major coin is denounced as counterfeit.” (Adorno 1949, 179).

Adorno’s diagnosis is not idiosyncratic to twentieth-century music theory, but belongs to a longer philosophical genealogy. His comparison between tonality and money functions explicitly as a metaphor, and more precisely as a heuristic device: the image of the coin is mobilised to clarify a situation in which a mediating form continues to circulate after the historical conditions that once secured its binding force have been exhausted. Adorno does not thereby propose an economic theory of music, nor does he equate musical and economic processes. Rather, the metaphor serves to expose a shared structural problem of mediation itself. His account of musical mediation thus presupposes a concept he does not invent but critically inherits, making it necessary to return to its systematic formulation within German Idealism.

The concept of *Vermittlung* enters philosophy in a systematic form with G. W. F. Hegel, for whom coherence is never given immediately. What appears as immediate—whether in perception, thought, or social life—remains indeterminate as long as it stands in isolation. Coherence becomes possible only through mediation: through processes of relation, transition, and negation that connect an element to what lies beyond it. Mediation therefore does not designate an external instrument or technical means, but a dynamic movement through which something becomes intelligible only by passing beyond its initial immediacy. Mediation begins from what appears as immediate, yet immediacy acquires meaning only insofar as it is mediated. Thought, in this sense, neither preserves immediacy as such nor imposes form from outside; it works through immediacy by transforming it into a mediated relation. Coherence is achieved not by eliminating difference, but by articulating relations in which difference remains active. Crucially, mediation is not a weakening of coherence or a provisional substitute for immediacy. On the contrary, Hegel insists that coherence achieves its independence precisely through mediation: what is fully mediated is not less stable, but more so, because it has passed through a process that renders its determinations necessary rather than contingent. Mediation thus functions as an active and constitutive process through which coherence, meaning, and structural stability are generated (Hegel 1830, 40–41)².

This logical conception of *Vermittlung* does not remain confined to logic of thought, but is transformed as it enters the analysis of historically concrete social relations. What Hegel articulates

¹ Throughout this paper, “mediation” is used as the standard English translation of Adorno’s term *Vermittlung*. While *Vermittlung* has a specific philosophical genealogy in German Idealism, it is not fully captured by the English term “mediation,” which often suggests instrumental or technical means. In this article, mediation is therefore understood in Adorno’s sense as a historically conditioned process through which relations become intelligible, binding, and socially credible, rather than as a neutral medium or tool. The German term *Vermittlung* is retained where conceptual precision or direct engagement with Adorno’s terminology is required.

² The distinction between immediacy: *Unmittelbarkeit*, and mediation: *Vermittlung*, is already present in Hegel’s earlier work and develops progressively across his writings. The formulation cited here is taken from his later systematic presentation, where this distinction is articulated in a condensed and explicit manner. This reference is therefore used for conceptual clarity rather than for reasons of chronological priority.