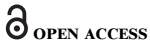




Journal of Adorno Studies



I 1/2025
DOI: 10.7413/joas021

Copyright: © 2025 – The Author(s).
This is an open access article distributed
under the terms of the Creative Com-
mons Attribution License (CC-BY-4.0).

Beautiful Passages (*Schöne Stellen*): Translators' Introduction

SHIERRY WEBER NICHOLSEN, JEREMY J. SHAPIRO

Adorno begins this text¹ with a theoretical statement that he characterizes as a “heretical” counterpart to his usual emphasis on structural hearing—hearing that is oriented to the integrity of the whole. Here instead he will focus on the contribution of the detail; hence the heresy. Indeed, Adorno also published this first section separately under the title “Little Heresy.”² From this perspective, it is the detail, the beautiful passage, from which the whole is built up—composition from the bottom up, so to speak, something he emphasizes in his book on Mahler. This is especially important, Adorno notes, in the era of progressive modern music with its dissociative tenden-

- 1 Adorno gave “Schöne Stellen” as a radio talk in August 1965 on the Hessischer Rundfunk. Some excerpts were performed by a pianist at the studio; for others, recordings were used. This translation is of the text as printed in the following collection: Theodor W. Adorno, *Musikalische Schriften V*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 18 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 695–718.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, “Little Heresy,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2002), 318–324.

cies. Adorno is concerned with the musical dialectic of the particular and the general and their mediation with each other. This dialectic fails when the general is merely general, amounting to a simple repetition of schemata, especially those of the tonal system, and the detail becomes merely an implementation of those schemata. For the listener the musical dialectic fails when the particular is heard in one or the other of two non- or anti-musical modes of listening: what Adorno calls the “atomistic,” in which the detail or passage is heard in complete isolation rather than in its musical context within the piece, and what he calls the “culinary,” in which the listener is focused on the purely sensuous quality of the note or notes.

“Beautiful Passages” offers us a brief introduction to the aesthetics of listening. In musical listening, as opposed to atomistic or culinary listening, one hears the beauty of the detail in its musical context. Adorno will present us some passages chosen to demonstrate beautiful details, particular favorites of his own in a systematically organized chronological order (from Bach to Schoenberg), and he will try, he says, to show what makes each of these passages beautiful. But precisely what that is—at least for Adorno—we are to discover through his description of the passages as heard in his experience of listening. This musical experience, Adorno says, is the product of the listener’s exercise of *exakte Phantasie*, or exact imagination. (We have used “imagination” rather than “fantasy” here because the English “fantasy” suggests a scenario driven by the subject’s desire, rather than an imaginative subjective response aroused by the music itself). Exact, in that it follows the contours of the music itself; imagination, in that it gives rise to a subjective experience integrating an inner experience of the senses with musical meaning.

How to articulate such an experience? With emotionally-tinged metaphorical or figurative descriptions of the inner experience of listening. Adorno precedes each of the passages he has chosen with a commentary including such a description, as well as some of what one might find in conventional musicological commentary. But when the musicological comments are linked with the experiential descriptions, they transcend pedantry or platitude. Of Mozart’s Violin Sonata in A Major, Köchel 526, for example, Adorno says:

It has become a cliché to attribute to Mozart divine playfulness. In this sonata a theme appears that rescues this attribute from its cliché status and really sounds as though, with its unexpected improvisatory expansion, music had abandoned all controls, the ignominy of all bonds, and floated off the earth with cherubic bliss.

Here Adorno has given us the experiential meaning behind the cliché. At other times the description is so precise and yet so experientially evocative that we know we are in a different realm of commentary altogether. For example, of the theme of the variations movement, the second movement of

Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 23, Op. 57, the *Appassionata*, Adorno notes that the theme "only really speaks when one hears it directly after the coda of the first movement, a fully composed catastrophe." This is how he describes what we then hear:

After that explosion and collapse [the end of the first movement], the theme of the variations movement sounds as though it were bent over under a giant shadow, an oppressive burden. The muffled character of the sound seems to musically elaborate this sense of burden.

If "Beautiful Passages," with its focus on the particular, was a heretical move for Adorno, the proponent of structural listening, as a display of exact imagination in listening to the beautiful detail, it was heretical in another way as well. Elsewhere, he had focused on other dimensions of listening, such as the regression of listening under conditions of reification in advanced capitalism in "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" (1938),³ the different social types of listening in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1963),⁴ and its almost microscopic structure in his guidelines for listening to new music, "Anweisungen zum Hören neuer Musik" (1963)⁵. "Beautiful Passages," in contrast, demonstrates the role of the subjective listening experience in establishing musical objectivity. At the same time, it is important to remember that Adorno's underlying goal here is not to improve one's "music appreciation," a concept that Adorno detested and critiqued. Rather, it is to develop within the realm of aesthetic experience a kind of autonomy and freedom from reified stereotypes and "false consciousness" that is essential to critical experience, thought, and imagination.

3 Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2002), 288–317.

4 Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1988).

5 Theodor W. Adorno, "Anweisungen zum Hören neuer Musik," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 15 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 189–248.