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The Curves of the Needle*

THEODOR W. ADORNO

TRANSLATED BY THOMAS Y. LEVIN

Talking machines and phonograph records seem to have suffered the same historical fate as that which once befell photographs: the transition from artisanal to industrial production transforms not only the technology of distribution but also that which is distributed. As the recordings become more perfect in terms of plasticity and volume, the subtlety of color and the authenticity of vocal sound declines as if the singer were being distanced more and more from the apparatus. The records, now fabricated out of a different mixture of materials, wear out faster than the old ones. The incidental noises, which have disappeared, nevertheless survive in the more shrill tone of the instruments and the singing. In a similar fashion, history drove out of photographs the shy relation to the speechless object that still reigned in daguerreotypes, replacing it with a photographic sovereignty borrowed from lifeless psychological painting to which, furthermore, it remains inferior. Artisanal compensations for the substantive loss of quality are at odds with the real economic situation. In their early phases, these technologies had the power to penetrate rationally the reigning artistic practice. The moment one attempts to improve these early technologies through an emphasis on concrete fidelity, the exactness one has ascribed to them is exposed as an illusion by the very technology itself. The positive tendency of consolidated technology to

* This essay, "Nadelkurven," was written in 1927 and published in 1928 in the *Musikblätter des Anbruch* 10 (February 1928), pp. 47–50. It is reprinted in *Phono: Internationale Schallplatten-Zeitschrift* 6 (July-August 1965), pp. 123–4, and again in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 19 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), pp. 525–29, © 1984, Suhrkamp Verlag. The 1965 republication carried the following note:

It goes without saying that over the course of forty years, insights into a technological medium become outdated. On the other hand, even at that time there was already a recognition of aspects of the transformed character of experience which, even as it was caused by technology, also had an effect on that very same technology. The motifs have been retained unchanged and with no attempt to cover up the temporal distance; the author made changes in the language to the extent that he deemed it necessary [Adorno's note; all subsequent notes are by the translator].

Max Beckmann. Möbliert. 1920.



present objects themselves in as unadorned a fashion as possible is, however, traversed by the ideological need of the ruling society, which demands subjective reconciliation with these objects—with the reproduced voice as such, for example. In the aesthetic form of technological reproduction, these objects no longer possess their traditional reality. The ambiguity [*Zweideutigkeit*] of the results of forward-moving technology—which does not tolerate any constraint—confirms the ambiguity of the process of forward-moving rationality as such.

The relevance of the talking machines is debatable. The spatially limited effect of every such apparatus makes it into a utensil of the private life that regulates the consumption of art in the nineteenth century. It is the bourgeois family that gathers around the gramophone in order to enjoy the music that it itself—as was already the case in the feudal household—is unable to perform. The fact that the public music of that time—or at least the arioso works of the first half of the nineteenth century—was absorbed into the record repertoire testifies to its private character, which had been masked by its social presentation. For the time being, Beethoven defies the gramophone. The diffuse and atmospheric comfort of the small but bright gramophone sound corresponds to the humming gaslight and is not entirely foreign to the whistling teakettle of bygone literature. The gramophone belongs to the pregnant stillness of individuals.

If one were to be thoroughly rigorous, the expression “mechanical music” is hardly appropriate to talking machines.¹ The mechanism of the gramophone effects only the reduced transmission, adapted to domestic needs, of preexisting works. The work and its interpretation are accommodated but not disturbed or merged into each other: in its relative dimensions the work is retained and the obedient machine—which in no way dictates any formal principles of its own—follows the interpreter in patient imitation of every nuance. This sort of practice simply assumes the unproblematic existence of the works themselves as well as the interpreter’s right to that freedom, which the machine accompanies with devout whirring. Yet both of these are in decline. Neither the works (which are dying out) nor the interpreters (who are growing silent) obey the private apparatus any more. Interpretations whose subjective aspect had been eliminated—as is virtually the case in works by Stravinsky²—do not require any further

1. Adorno is referring here to the use of the term in such vanguard musicological debates of the time as H. H. Stuckenschmidt’s 1926 article on “Mechanische Musik” in a special issue of the Prague music journal *Der Auftakt: Musikblätter für die Tschechoslowakische Republik* on “Music and Machine,” vol. 6, no. 8 (1926), pp. 170–73. The tenacity of this designation, Adorno’s objections notwithstanding, is indicated by its employment as late as 1930 in the title of a special issue of *Der Auftakt* (vol. 10, no. 11) devoted to “Mechanical Music.”

2. For a discussion of what Adorno described as Stravinsky’s “hysterically exaggerated suspicion of the subject” and the consequent attempt on the part of the composer to excise all traces of subjectivity in his works, see Adorno’s 1962 essay “Stravinsky: Ein dialektisches Bild,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), pp. 382–409 and especially p. 397.



reproduction; the works that in themselves are in need of free interpretation begin to become unreproducible. The archival character of records is readily apparent: just in time, the shrinking sounds are provided with herbaria that endure for ends that are admittedly unknown. The relevance of the talking machines is debatable.

The transformation of the piano from a musical instrument into a piece of bourgeois furniture — which Max Weber accurately perceived — is recurring in the case of the gramophone but in an extraordinarily more rapid fashion.³ The

3. For an illustrated discussion of this development, see Graham Melville-Mason, "The Gramophone as Furniture," in *Phonographs and Gramophones: The Edison Phonograph Centenary Symposium* (Edinburgh: The Royal Scottish Museum, 1977), pp. 117–38.

Pierre Dubreuil. Lyres Modernes. 1928–29.
(Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum).

fate of the gramophone horns marks this development in a striking manner. In their brassiness, they initially projected the mechanical being of the machines onto the surface. In better social circles, however, they were quickly muffled into colored masses or wood chalices. But they proceeded to make their way into private apartments, these fanfares of the street, loudspeakers and shrouds of the emptiness that people usually prefer to enshroud within themselves. In Max Beckmann's postwar paintings, these drastic symbols are still recorded.⁴ The stabilization subsequently excises these disturbers of the peace with a gentle hand; the last ones still drone out of bordello bars. In the functional salon, the gramophone stands innocuously as a little mahogany cabinet on little rococo legs. Its cover provides a space for the artistic photograph of the divorced wife with the baby. Through discrete cracks comes the singing of the Revelers,⁵ all of whom have a soul; baby remains quiet. Meanwhile, the downtrodden gramophone horns reassert themselves as proletarian loudspeakers.

With its movable horn and its solid spring housing, the gramophone's social position is that of a border marker between two periods of musical practice. It is in front of the gramophone that both types of bourgeois music lovers encounter each other. While the expert examines all the needles and chooses the best one, the consumer just drops in his dime—and the sound that responds to both may well be the same.

In Nice, on the other side far away from the big hotels, there is a locale where, with considerable effort, one extracts some publicity from the gramophone whose private character is conserved in French fashion. There, along the walls in sealed glass cases, one finds twenty gramophones lined up one next to

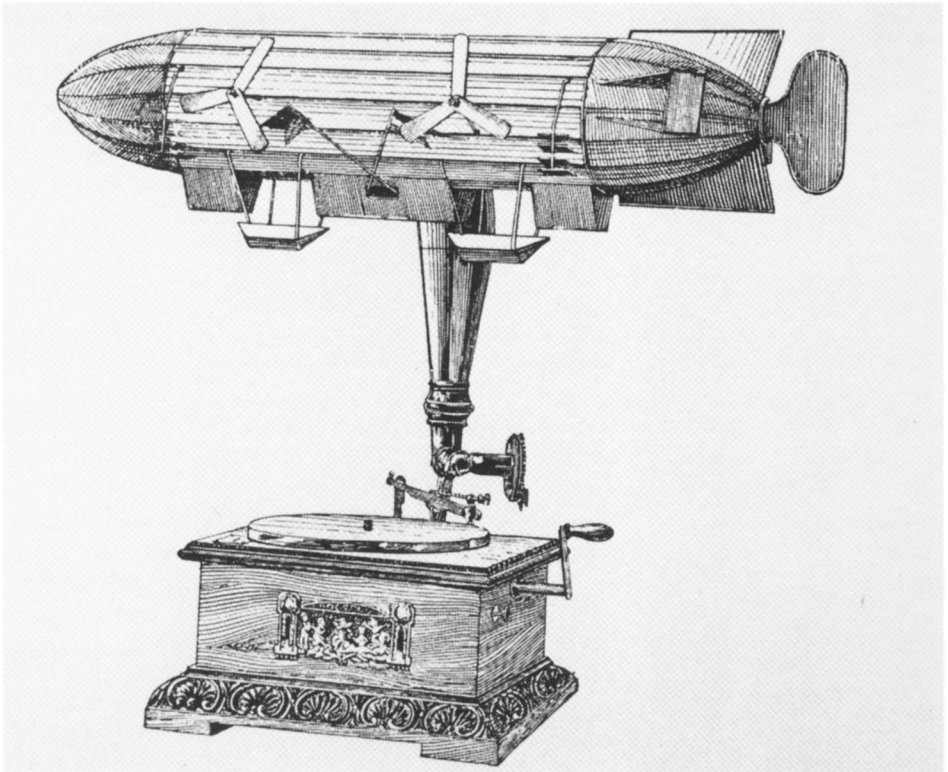
For Weber's remarks on the piano, see Max Weber, *Die rationalen und soziologischen Grundlagen der Musik* (1921), which is included as an appendix in Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann, 4th edition (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1956), vol. 2, pp. 925–28, and which has been reprinted as a separate volume (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1972), pp. 73–77. An English translation by Don Martindale, Johannes Riedel, and Gertrude Neuwirth was published under the title *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958). The section relevant to the current context is also available in a translation by Eric Matthews entitled "The History of the Piano," in *Max Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 378–82.

4. See, for example, the 1920 lithograph *Möbliert* from the *Stadtnacht* series, as well as the 1924 painting *Stilleben mit Grammophon und Schwertlilien*, in Max Beckmann, *Frankfurt 1915–1933*, ed. Klaus Gallwitz (Frankfurt a.M.: Städtische Galerie, 1983).

5. The Revelers were the most popular singing act of the latter half of the 1920s in vaudeville and cabaret, on the air, and on records. Originally known as the Shannon Quartet, the group consisted of Lewis James and Franklyn Baur (tenors), Elliott Shaw (baritone), and Wilfred Glenn (bass); in 1924 they were joined by the baritone, piano accompanist, and arranger Ed Smalle. Most well known as "The Revelers," the name under which they recorded for Victor (HMV) Records, the quintet also made records as "The Merrymakers" (on the Brunswick label) and as "The Singing Sophomores" (on Columbia Records). Members of the group also sang—often anonymously—as duos, trios, and quartets on hundreds of cuts by dance bands of all sorts from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s.

another, each of which doggedly services one record. The gramophones are operated automatically by inserting a token. In order to hear something, one has to put on a pair of headphones: those who don't pay hear nothing. And yet, one after another, everyone hears. In this manner the use of radio technology penetrates the tenaciously preserved sphere of the gramophone and explodes it from within. Audience and object alike are *petit bourgeois* girls, most of them under-age. The big attractions are a screeching record by Mistinguett⁶ and the lewd *chansons* of a baritone who rhymes the impotent Siméon with his large pantalons. Both text and music hang on the wall above. The girls wait for someone to approach them.

6. Mistinguett (1875–1956) was the stage name of Jeanne Florentine Bourgeois, a French chanson singer and actress who performed early in her career at the Folies-Bergères together with Maurice Chevalier and quickly became the leading lady of the Paris revue-theaters in the 1920s. Her autobiography is available in a translation by Lucienne Hill as *Mistinguett, Queen of the Paris Night* (London: Elek Books, 1954).



Phonograph with Zeppelin-Shaped Speaker, Schwäbische Metallwarenfabrik GmbH, Unterlenningen-Teck, Württemberg. 1908.

The dog on records listening to his master's voice⁷ off of records through the gramophone horn is the right emblem for the primordial affect which the gramophone stimulated and which perhaps even gave rise to the gramophone in the first place. What the gramophone listener actually wants to hear is himself, and the artist merely offers him a substitute for the sounding image of his own person, which he would like to safeguard as a possession. The only reason that he accords the record such value is because he himself could also be just as well preserved. Most of the time records are virtual photographs of their owners, flattering photographs—ideologies.

The mirror function of the gramophone arises out of its technology. What is best reproduced gramophonically is the singing voice. Here, "best" means most faithful to the natural ur-image and not at all most appropriate to the mechanical from the outset. But good records want, above all, to be similar.

Male voices can be reproduced better than female voices. The female voice easily sounds shrill—but not because the gramophone is incapable of conveying high tones, as is demonstrated by its adequate reproduction of the flute. Rather, in order to become unfettered, the female voice requires the physical appearance of the body that carries it. But it is just this body that the gramophone eliminates, thereby giving every female voice a sound that is needy and incomplete. Only there where the body itself resonates, where the self to which the gramophone refers is identical with its sound, only there does the gramophone have its legitimate realm of validity: thus Caruso's uncontested dominance. Wherever sound is separated from the body—as with instruments—or wherever it requires the body as a complement—as is the case with the female voice—gramophonic reproduction becomes problematic.

With the advent of the gramophone, absolute pitch runs into difficulties. It is almost impossible to guess the actual pitch if it deviates from the original one. In that case, the original pitch becomes confused with that of the phonographic reproduction. For as a whole, the sound of the gramophone has become so much more abstract than the original sound that again and again it needs to be complemented by specific sensory qualities of the object it is reproducing and on which it depends in order to remain at all related to that object. Its abstraction presupposes the full concreteness of its object, if it is to become in any way graspable, thereby circumscribing the domain of what can be reproduced. Phonographic technology calls for a natural object. If the natural substance of the object is itself already permeated by intentionality or mechanically fractured, then the record is no longer capable of grasping it. Once again the historical limits of the talking machines are inscribed upon them.

7. English in original. For a richly illustrated account of the HMV logo, see Leonard Petts, *The Story of "Nipper" and the "His Master's Voice" picture painted by Francis Barraud* (Bournemouth: The Talking Machine Review International, 1973/1983).



The turntable of the talking machines is comparable to the potter's wheel: a tone-mass [*Ton-Masse*]⁸ is formed upon them both, and for each the material is preexisting. But the finished tone/clay container that is produced in this manner remains empty. It is only filled by the hearer.

There is only one point at which the gramophone interferes with both the work and the interpretation. This occurs when the mechanical spring wears out. At this point the sound droops in chromatic weakness and the music bleakly plays itself out. Only when gramophonic reproduction breaks down are its objects transformed. Or else one removes the records and lets the spring run out in the dark.

8. Adorno here plays upon the untranslatable polyvalence of *Ton*, which in German means both "sound" or "tone" and also "clay." A *Ton-Masse* is thus a quantity or mass both of acoustic and of argillaceous material.

*Phonograph with Rotating Christmas Tree,
Wilhelm Dietrich Co., Leipzig. Circa 1909.*