

A Walk Along the Royal Road:

Prague, Tourists, and Music Commodification¹

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Abstract

This article focuses on a typical phenomenon in contemporary Prague – art music concerts for – mostly foreign – tourists which are presented here as a crystallized example of music commodification connected with mass tourism. As source material, two ethnographic snapshots are used, the first one describing a walk along the Royal Road with the most intense circulation of tourists, the second capturing an exemplary concert at the Prague castle, the most popular tourist venue. The first snapshot thus reveals methods of advertising (including the function of the locality), the second, the way in which the main subject – music performance – is transformed. Together they create a foreign tourist's imaginary experience in the backstage of historic Prague.

This visitor, according to concepts of the anthropology of tourism, strives to step out of his daily routine and looks for ready-made experiences in a sphere far from his usual activities (Rapport - Overing, 2000). He is helped by the mechanisms of advertising to which he is exposed on the Royal Road. Thus, he becomes a consumer of these mechanisms' products, which are adjusted to his needs – according to strategies described by Adorno, the most important of which is standardization.

The Prague material calls attention to the rarely described fact that commodification mechanisms need not be applied only to popular music: using the local specificity of historical parts of Prague, they adjust into commodified shape selected pieces of Western art music.

Keywords: *Prague, Music Commodification, Tourism, Theodor Adorno*

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Introduction

The Royal Road is the traditional route where the coronation processions of the Czech rulers walked before the actual coronation took place. The royal coronation route begins at Republic Square, where earlier stood the Royal Court, the second seat of the Czech kings, and continues along Celetná Street to Old Town Square. From that square the route leads along Karlova Street to the Charles Bridge and then farther to the Lesser Quarter. From the Lesser Quarter Square the route continues up Nerudova Street to the Prague Castle.²

Today the Royal Road belongs not to the rulers, but to the tourists – and to those who live from them. That isn't surprising because it connects the main dominant architectonic highlights of Prague and because it is featured in foreign tour guides like Lonely Planet. Hana Cernáková, a student of ethnomusicology at the Faculty of Humanities, walked along this route for her research. Except for the Municipal House on the Square of the Republic, only very few concerts with regular audience of Praguers take place here. However, you can find here countless concerts for tourists. And this is what Hana focuses on.

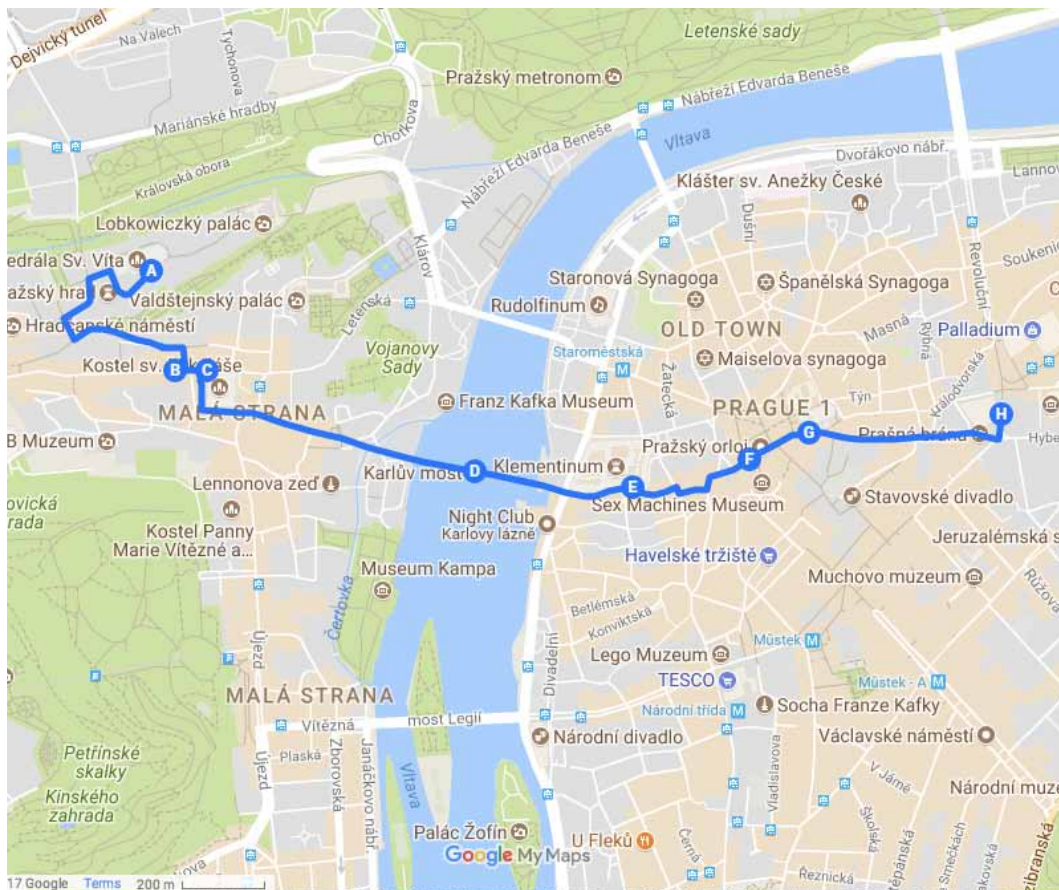


Figure 1. Map of the Royal Round route with stops labeled to match articles' text. Online link is here.

From Hana's fieldnotes:

I decided to walk in the opposite direction from the one of the coronation procession. The main advantage is that I won't have to claw my way from Lesser Town to the top of the hill.



Figure 2. Prague from the Petrín Hill lookout tower - Zuzana Jurková.

I thus get out at the Pohorelec tram stop before three o'clock and head for the Castle (Pražský hrad, see map "A"). My main goal is to scout around for musical events. Twenty minutes later I leave the Castle without success. (Concerts in the Lobkowitz Palace, which are held regularly, are probably on a break.) Among the many tourists, I didn't meet anyone who looked as if he had flyers with an invitation to a concert.

I set out for Ke Hradu Street, leading to Nerudova, which I intend to descend toward Lesser Town Square. A large concentration of tourists grasping flyers suggests to me that I will be more successful here than in the Castle area itself.

On Nerudova Street (see map "B") I acquire my first invitation to a concert at number 22, which is the Church of Mother Virgin Mary of Permanent Help and St. Kajetán. Above the entrance door there is a large banner (it doesn't appear to be very professional) on which there is, in large letters, "CONCERT." A woman is standing behind the ticket table in the entrance. Her colleague is giving out flyers on the street and luring people. I approach the woman and want to take a flyer off the table to find out what the concert is about when she begins talking to me. She speaks quite fluent Czech with a Russian accent. She invites me to the concert, which begins in about three-quarters of an hour. It is called 'Organ Gala Concert' and, according to the flyer, it is repeated every afternoon from January first to eighth at four o'clock. The only exception is the sixth, when they will play the very popular Czech Christmas Mass by Jakub Jan Ryba (1765 – 1815) at six o'clock. I can imagine that Ryba's Mass will be performed by some enthusiasts – as it is every year – and that they will be happy if some listeners appear. Today you apparently have to pay, but the sixth you can come in free. I come across blurbs for this concert all along the route to Lesser Town Square.

On Mostecká Street a little pack of flyers is attached to a street lamp and I pull one off. It invites me to a “Guitar Concert” today at seven. The Czech guitar duo of Jana and Petr Bierhanzl will be playing compositions from Vivaldi to flamenco style. I will again come across these ads on lamps in Old Town Square and Celetná Street.

I walk over the Charles Bridge (Karlův Most, see map D) without harm to my health, nor am I robbed, which in this throng and madness wouldn’t have surprised me, albeit without a flyer or any other invitation to a concert. But this will change as soon as I walk through the passage from the bridge and stand in front of the Church of the Holy Savior. I am invited to a concert starting at five; a gentleman literally “pushes” me toward the box office and asks where I’m from. I beg off, saying I don’t want to go to a concert now, and continue along Karlova Street (see map E).

Karlova Street is most probably a paradise for concerts and cultural events in general. Right at the beginning you are lured to the Ta Fantastika Black Theater. It is true that I don’t see anyone handing out flyers, but the posters in the theater building are emphatic enough. And the fact that they play the same show twice a day, once at five and then at eight-thirty is very reminiscent of the “Best of” tourist concerts. The advertisements attract the viewer to the special effects of the Black Theater and the music of Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák. However, I wouldn’t learn of this if I didn’t know English or other world languages. This is the only performance that offers tickets on-line, but the choice is already limited a month in advance. Every day only about thirty tickets – always for the same seats – are available for 720 crowns.

A few meters farther on a man hands me a flyer for a performance of *Don Giovanni*, which you can see on Karlova Street 12. They play it daily at five and at eight. The “distributor” points out the nearby box office where I can also obtain a flyer for a performance of the famous musical *Cats*, which is given daily at seven-thirty on Na Mustku Street 3.

I stopped for a while in the underpass near the box office so I could organize my papers and all the detailed notes I’ve taken. I say this because when, after that, I went a little farther an older man invited me to a performance in the Church of St. Clement. Before he could finish telling me something about the concert in bad English his younger colleague rushed over and roughly informed him that he could relax and speak Czech to me, that I was surely Czech and that he saw that I was writing something. Quizzically I looked at this younger man and he immediately, in his Russian accent, added that if I was Czech I didn’t like music and wouldn’t go to the concert – and he began to take the flyers away from me. I didn’t allow that and protested that I did like music and that it wasn’t his business what I was writing. Then I rapidly disappeared because he seemed quite angry.

I continue along Karlova Street. In front of the Klementinum I receive a flyer from a completely charming man, but when I thank him in Czech he turns his back as I

don't interest him any more. Here they are also in a pair: while one distributes flyers on the street, the other sells tickets at the portal. The concert should begin in a while and so he is trying to attract the greatest number of tourists immediately.

I come to the last part of Karlova Street. Almost in front of Little Square I see a small, older woman who is angrily shouting at a young pair who are walking away from her. I wait to be sure she has calmed down and again begun to give out flyers. After a while I come to the woman, take a colored paper from her and, in English, ask what it is. She looks at me mistrustfully and checks if I'm really a foreigner. After a while it seems that she does trust me – fortunately her English is worse than mine. I steer away from the question where I'm from and ask her about the price. Tickets are supposedly 400 crowns. I ask her if it's only today or if I can also go another day. Today it starts at six. On the back side of the flyer there is another concert today, only later, but this doesn't interest the woman and she takes out a block of tickets which appears rather like an ordinary badly printed pub pad. On it the price is 490 crowns. The woman explains to me that I am a student and therefore can have it for 400 crowns. She asks if that is very expensive and so I explain to her that I would rather go on January sixth and that I have to discuss it with friends, that I won't buy a ticket now. The woman asks me how many we would be and suggests a group discount and prepares the tickets – for six people it would be even cheaper. I spoil her mood by refusing to buy the tickets and the woman begins to be unpleasant and so I prefer to say goodbye and continue to Old Town Square. It would quite interest me to whom she offers the tickets for 790 crowns which I see she has hidden under the cheaper ones.

At Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí, see map “F”) nobody is giving anything out anywhere (or I don't register anyone because of the crowd of tourists), and so I prefer to calm down and go to the equally bustling Celetná Street (see map “G”). Right after its beginning I obtain from two young men the same flyer the preceding woman offered me. When I take it, one of the men thanks me in Russian. After my English answer, he adds, “Thank you.” I have an impulse to try “thanks” in other languages, but I prefer to go on.

I come across the last flyers in front of the Municipal House (figure 3). Obecní dum, see map “H”); apart from the “distributor” I can also take them from little stands at the entrance. There are really many concerts here, even in the large Smetana Hall. Today, for example, I could go to an eight o'clock concert called *The Best of Mozart and Dvorák*, but then I wouldn't make the performance at eight-thirty which is called *Pop and Classic Music: from W. A. Mozart to Freddie Mercury*. On other days the Municipal House offers me jazz or music from musicals, which, however, compete with Antonio Vivaldi and *The Four Seasons* and other pieces, e.g., *The Best of Classics with Soprano*. All the concerts are repeated several times. I obtained five flyers. In an hour and a half on the streets of Prague I have received invitations to almost fifteen concerts. All are a category of *The Best of...*, or those “Best Spaces” with “*the Longest Traditions...*”



Figure 3. The Municipal House - Zuzana Jurková.

Theodor Adorno on Popular Music³ and Its Fetishistic Character

Listening to popular music is manipulated not only by its promoters but, as it were, by the inherent nature of this music itself, into a system of response mechanisms wholly antagonistic to the idea of individuality in a free, liberal society.

This key sentence from the essay *On popular music*⁴ summarizes the main thoughts of the German philosopher, sociologist and musicologist Theodor Adorno (1903 – 1969), a musicologically oriented member of the famous Frankfurt School.⁵ At the end of the '30s, in the United States of America, where he emigrated because of racial persecution, he wrote a number of essays in which he tried, through music, to understand the society that was steering toward a world war. He views music through a prism of the Marxist concept of commodification.⁶ Music – namely the popular kind that he strictly separates from “serious” music – according to him, is becoming -- in the 20th century, in view of technical possibilities, especially the possibility of mass reproduction – a commodity which, however, should not happen.⁷ And not only that: it is connected to the music industry, which basically influences the listener.

The basic feature of the musical language of popular music is, according to Adorno, “standardization.” This is expressed on all levels: in the field of form (for example, equally long basic structural parts of a song), harmony, rhythm, and even in details the essence of which should make every composition special, but which are repeated so often that they have earned special terms (*blue notes*, *break*...) Such standardization constantly leads the listener to the same listening experiences until he stops expecting something new. His nod to the heard (or

even still unheard) song is not especially a nod to one concrete composition, but to a pre-existing whole. *Previously given agreement to a previously given composition.* A standardized sound product obviously evokes a standard reaction: the listener, deprived of the spontaneity of surprising experiences, does not have to bother to follow the concrete course of the music. This is already “pre-digested.” But because listeners have vague ideas about what they want to hear – ideas having to do with fields where music is supposed to belong rather than primarily its sound (these ideas will be discussed later) – the reality of standardization must remain hidden. It remains hidden behind what Adorno calls *pseudo-individualization*: making special the details (which, however, may not disturb the basic structure to which they are subordinated so that the listener always feels secure in the framework of well-known schemes), a certain “specialness,” individuality of the interpreters, an individuality that is emphasized, but is not too distinctive. Besides, it is necessary to put such emphasis on this very interpretation because it can make an otherwise non-individualized and almost indistinguishable type of music distinguishable.

As an illustration Adorno introduces two contradictory examples: from Wagner’s opera *Parsifal* the Kundry motif, which the listener (as Adorno writes rather ironically: “the listener with normal musical intelligence”) remembers right away – in contrast to melodies of popular music which require great effort to remember.

If the musical language of popular music is maximally simple, the same applies to social demands, which popular music needs for life. The first and main one is *advertisement*. However, only products that fulfill, on one hand, standard needs and, on the other hand, are distinguishable from other, very similar products are advertisable. Therefore the “hit” must have at least one memorable element – melodic, harmonic or, perhaps, rhythmic or instrumental. Its “individuality,” that is, its distinguishability, however, must always be in the framework of those standard schemes. Constant repetition of a potential hit is necessary, not only for the above-mentioned reasons, but also because of the creation of the idea that the already accepted, that is, successful, song is played.

Adorno pays rather exhaustive attention to the process of recognition and acceptance of a song hit. On one hand he points out the basic difference between a way of “recognition” of a composition in the fields of “serious” and popular music. In art music, recognition does not consist of discerning motifs of, let us say, a Beethoven sonata, but of recognition, that is, understanding of the mutual relations of individual elements and thus the sense of the whole composition. If I identify with the entire meaning, I accept the composition as mine. Because a similar process is not necessary in popular music (after all, mutual relations of individual elements have been clear for a long time), the acceptance of a composition proceeds on another level: identification with the opinions of the others. So many people appreciate this particular song, which I am also capable of recognizing, that by it they confirm its value.

For Adorno, the basic question is how is it possible that all of this type of music/ the whole field of popular music is so appealing to the masses (because a description of the functioning of its own mechanisms is not yet the whole answer). According to him, the main reason is the insertion of popular music into the

framework of free time, that is, the sphere of leisure and fun without any need for concentration.

Here is an expression of Adorno's Marxism: *Distraction is bound to the present mode of production, to the rationalized and mechanized process of labor to which, directly or indirectly, masses are subject. This mode of production, which engenders fears and anxiety about unemployment, loss of income, war, has its "non-productive" correlate in entertainment; that is, relaxation which does not involve the effort of concentration at all.*

It is exactly this character of undemanding fun that enables the direction of advertisement toward the field of luxury (Adorno uses the term "glamour") as it is otherwise commonly used for advertisement of any kind of product. Meanwhile it is clear at the same time that it is about the independent game of ideas.

The last important feature of an advertisement is that it does not relate only to music alone, but to the whole field of popular music, mainly its performers; the media also perceive them in situations that have no connection with music.

In an analysis of the essay *On Popular Music* Adorno ties in another article -- *On the Fetish-character in music and the Regression of Listening*. In it he describes social mechanisms that function in an environment of popular music in the same way as in other branches of the market – mechanisms of production (primarily the production of sound media),⁸ distribution and advertisements. The listener, deprived of his own spontaneous interest in music and pleasure from it, becomes defenseless against these mechanisms.

In the 80 years since the formulations of Adorno's texts, the world has changed in many ways – both in social reality and in our understanding of it. For example, the term "masses" appears not only in connection with production, but also with tourism as the number of people traveling abroad has increased from one million in 1939 to 650 million in 2000. (Rapport – Overing, 2000:353). The previous and following snapshots show each one from a different perspective in what Adorno considered basic features of commodified culture – connections with "leisure," mechanisms of advertisement, standardization of "product," with a nesting in glamour remain the same.

Prague Castle Concert Pearls of Czech and World Classical Music Lobkowicz Palace in the Prague Castle

March 4, 2013, 1 p.m.

After many overcast winter months, today for the first time the sky is really bright and sunny and the eternal tourists are enjoying it. Although still warmly dressed, they are already streaming through the Lesser Quarter, from where I climb to the Castle (in the little park in their midst I come across a poster for "my" daily castle concert); somewhat higher, then, they enthusiastically blink over the Lesser Quarter roofs and the Vltava (Moldau) River or again up to the Castle's silhouette. The Old Castle stairs are still quite empty (a couple of weeks later it will be almost impossible to walk this way), but two guitarists are already playing "Latin" music here and collecting money in a guitar case.

Immediately behind the gates guarded by two members of the Castle Guard is the Lobkowitz Palace on the left side. It is the only private building in the Castle complex. Next to the monumental Baroque portal giant posters hang inviting you to the palace's museum to view Canaletto's pictures of London and also Beethoven and Mozart manuscripts (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Tourists at the Prague Castle – Zuzana Jurková.

The young woman at the box office gives me the choice between the first tier for 490 CZK (\$25) (the first two rows) and the second tier for one hundred crowns less. Along with the ticket I receive a leaflet with the program and other foreign-language advertising materials full of sunny photographs. In the brochure for the whole Lobkowitz Palace I learn that I can buy a “Combo Ticket” in which I save money for a ticket to the concert and to the museum and I will have an additional 10% discount in the Lobkowitz café.

I walk along a red carpet to the second floor and to an antique door in front of which Beethoven on a poster admonishes me, “Quiet Please!” Now, though, I don’t yet have to obey; there is still a quarter of an hour till the beginning of the concert. I have time to examine both the room with its ceiling frescos, chandeliers on the walls and ruffled curtain and also the audience. So far there are only five people, but in the next quarter of an hour 18 people, mostly middle-aged couples, two bohemian-looking young men and a threesome of women join us. I am evidently the only Czech. Nobody runs in at the last minute, to say nothing of arriving late.

On a desk at the entrance one can read the names of the performers; however, it doesn't seem that anyone is interested. At three minutes after one a pianist in a black shirt and black pants arrives. He will play some compositions solo; in others he will accompany a violist. The first piece is a piano solo, *Invention*,⁹ by J. S. Bach. For this or for any of the other compositions, the program does not mention the key or the origin (I guess that it belongs to the collection Two-voice Inventions). The pianist plays for hardly two minutes. When he finishes, the audience applauds briefly. The player bows – and the violist already arrives. Without much ado the two play together the slow *Adagio* by Albinoni and immediately afterwards Gluck's *Pizzicato*. The first piece to attract the audience's attention much is Mozart's Turkish March; the Italian woman in front of me shakes her head to the rhythm of the repeating main motif and even one "Brrravo" is heard with a raucous German *rrr*. A similar response is evoked by Chopin's *Piece for Piano Solo*, which the pianist plays in an upper dynamic register, thoroughly fogged by the pedal.

In the second half the pianist plays several solo numbers one after the other: Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata (actually only its first movement) and For Elise, a piano adaptation of Smetana's *Vltava* and Dvorák's *Humoresque*. At the very end the violist appears and thanks the audience in English for coming and wishes them a nice day, upon which he launches into Khachaturian's *Saber Dance*. At the end the audience applauds more enthusiastically than before, and so both musicians return again, shake hands and again bow. Evidently, however, they don't intend to play another encore – nor does the audience seem to be expecting one. A few minutes after a quarter to two we leave.

Conclusion: Prague, Tourists, and Music as Goods

I ponder over this rather unusual experience. The concert at the Lobkowitz Palace, as though at first glance, disproved one of the most basic ethnomusicological theses, that musical language (which we sometimes call "style") is formed by social values surrounding the performance of music. What happened that classical music compositions, which are supposed to be expressions of stratified and specialized society and intended for well-versed listeners, are treated like pop songs?

The basis of the explanation lies in the context in which the concert – and many others indistinguishable from it on the Royal Road – takes place. It is primarily intended for foreign tourists. The culture of mass tourism is considered by anthropologists to be specific. Rapport – Overing described its condensed characteristic stating it's a "packaged form of experience in which passivity prevails." (2000:353)

The fact that the concert is actually intended for foreign tourists is obvious from the accompanying words in English, from the unimaginative dramaturgy (thus, it is not aimed toward those who are well versed in classical music), from the omnipresent advertisements on the Royal Road, and from the attractive location which those who pop in and out of Prague to admire its historic beauty would prefer to see even if no music were performed. Obviously, it is a successful configuration of assumptions and mechanisms since, after all, the audience is composed of foreigners willing to pay relatively high prices for tickets.

These prices or, more precisely, a certain disproportion (for a similar program, informed listeners would not pay so much) clearly show us what it is about. While the majority of classical music concerts put on for a typical audience take place primarily to satisfy their cultural demands (and it goes without saying that the listener will pay for that), here the order of motives is the opposite: for the organizers, it is primarily about making money, whereas, for the audience, it's about an undemanding cultural experience which – more or less coincidentally – has the appearance of music production. Here the characteristics described by Rapport – Overing where the “instrumental relationship is one that tourists see locals and their culture as commodities to be bought while locals see the visitors as sources to be milked” is perfectly applicable. (2000:354).

It is still necessary to examine the music that is performed. How do mechanisms of commodification cope with the sophisticated language of art music? The first and decisive step is decision-making: primarily, compositions have to be short and simple.

Thirteen pieces in fifty minutes: this isn't usually managed even in pop music, to say nothing of “classical.” There were only several-minute compositions, during which it is not possible to apply what Adorno characterizes as listening to classical music: following internal relations between individual elements and the understanding of them.

The second filter is penetrated by compositions of two types. One group of numbers in today's repertoire was composed of classical hits. The popularity of *Humoresque*, the *Turkish March*, the *Saber Dance* and *For Elise* is assured by the beginnings of distinctive, easily remembered melodies (not, for example, by sophisticated structure) – exactly that “pseudo-individualizing” moment which, according to Adorno, “makes” pop music a hit – and, as one can see, also in the case of a “classic.” The word “popularity” is, by the way, appropriate not only as a reference to a style of popular music, but also because of the extremely widespread social life of those “pearls” which today we hear more frequently in advertisements or on cell phones than on the concert stage.

The second group was compositions somehow typical of a given style: Albinoni's *Adagio* or Eccles' *Sonata* in Baroque style, Haydn's *Adagio* in Classical style and Chopin's composition in Romantic style. The compositions to which you can apply the idea of Adorno's standardization – a thousand times agreed on scheme and sound of generally agreed on musical style. While listening to them the public is not distracted by the mood of the Castle and, at the same time, it is not “troubled” by the too-long composition: apart from Eccles' short Baroque sonata whose four movements do not last more than five minutes, all of the other numbers are played like one-movement pieces although many of them originally belong to longer cycles.

The third step of commodification mechanism is to get rid of “superfluous” (for tourists) information: Apart from complete compositions, I also miss other compo-

nents of usual classical music concerts such as more data about the compositions which more demanding – specialized – listeners look for.

Apparently, however, here there are not the more demanding listeners who would evaluate the concert after the performance – those listeners who sometimes rush in at the last minute because they are so busy, but they can't miss THIS ONE!

On the contrary, aside from standardization and pseudo-individualization I also find other main Adorno characteristics of popular music. Primarily the importance of advertisements is undeniable: in the Castle complex (and below it) the omnipresent colored fliers on chalky paper, their electronic version on travel agency pages, a discount on entrance to the museum as another form of incentive... And here the appeal of non-binding entertainment embedded in the sphere of almost dreamlike glamour makes itself felt.

The environment, which, in the first place, concerns the generation of profit, chooses from almost any styles those “products” that are most suitable to its needs for standardization and, at the same time, alleged individualization. In the Lobkowitz Palace these are the most typical or the best known, in short, the simplest “pearls” of the classics. These are grasped – in Adorno's words – by “a whole system of interconnected mechanisms.” By means of advertisement and a glamorous environment it is able to attract such a number of musically undemanding tourists that their (relatively high) entrance fee covers several times the relatively low payment to two or three regularly performing musicians. A small, castle, tourist-oriented commodification.

Endnotes

- 1 Research for this article was supported by the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University Prague, Grant SVV 260418/2014. The text is partly based on the chapter Music as Goods in Jurková et al., Prague Soundscapes, Praha: Karolinum, 2014.
- 2 See: <http://www.praguecityline.cz/trasa-kralovska-cesta> (May 1, 2013).
- 3 Here we use the same expression as Adorno, who speaks about popular music. In other connections, however, we consider the term “popular music” as an umbrella term for the most varied music genres except the field of classical music, that is, also jazz, rock, folk, cross-over, world music, etc., for which, however, many Adorno characteristics do not hold. These are concentrated in the genre that we call pop music.
- 4 “On popular music,” in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences*, New York: Institute of Social Research, 1941, pp. 17 – 48.
- 5 The Frankfurt School is the name of a group of German left-oriented theoreticians in the Institute for Social Research, which was founded in 1923 at Frankfurt University. Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin and others analyzed culture in conditions of mass reproduction and they are considered the founders of “critical thinking,” systematic sociological theory, which substantially influenced the following generations.

- 6 The process through which objects become commodities whose value is given not only as a utility value, but also (often primarily) as an exchange value. For the topic “music as commodity” see, e.g. Taylor (2007), Chou, etc.
- 7 A reader familiar with various musical concepts of music around the world knows that the understanding of music as a sort of craft is common in many a culture and such a craft has no pejorative connotations. Adorno was trapped in the usual Western usage formed by Romanticism.
- 8 See also the famous Dummond and Cauty’s KLF – The Manual: How the Have a Number One the Easy Way (1988).
- 9 For the titles of the compositions I use the versions written in the program.

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