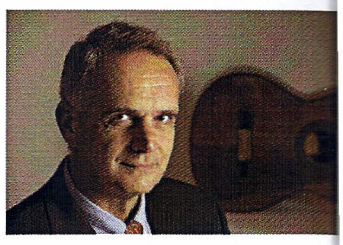

New freedom in music

Around 1900 the 'pianola' entered everyday life. It was very fashionable to have a pianola at home, just as it is fashionable today to have a flat screen TV, a 5.1 surround sound system, and a couple of CD, DVD, and MP-3 players. The pianola was a 'reproduction piano' that could play back music. As a consequence, music performance and listening was removed from the actual moment of live creation. Philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno built all kinds of theories around the fact that, in music and other fields of art, the original performance now no longer existed, and that only copies remained. In the 20th century a whole range of 'reproduction media' developed. Speaking in general, the music carrier developed from 78 rpm records to 33 rpm records, to LPs and then to CDs. In all of these stages of development there were products that were palpable and physically present. At times these could be beautifully designed, as with the covers of LPs, or full of information like some CD inlay booklets. The lack of the actual, unique performance was replaced by the packaging of the sound carrier. The consumer had no real idea of when, where, and how the music was made, but there was still a piece of shellac, vinyl, or plastic wrapped into some sort of informative and ornamental sleeve that you could hold in your hands, and which took up some space in the living room as being part of your music collection. Friends and visitors would check out your sound system, look at your music library and would compare it to theirs: "Do you really like this kind of music? do you have that recording as well? can I borrow this item from you? you should also listen to that..." A physically present, recorded sound collection contributed to the status of a person, and it was part of social communication.

With the digital revolution coming of age at the beginning of the 21st century the old patterns of behaviour no longer exist. Not only has the notion of the 'original performance' disappeared, the notion of the 'copy' has also gone. The existence of music has completely and dramatically changed. Music is now a commodity, like water, light, and warmth. For people in their twenties the household record collection is disappearing rapidly. There are no longer space-consuming and dust-collecting cupboards filled with CDs, let alone LPs. Music is sounding all the time but it comes from computers, MP-3 sticks, iPods, mobile telephones, memory sticks and other digital sound carriers. The sound system is as small as possible, if not invisible. iPods and other MP-3 players give little to no information about the music, and have become part of the listener's clothing. With music there is no longer any original performance nor any tactile artefact. Music just sounds: it's just there to listen to, to enjoy, and to be part of your life. Any music is there to be enjoyed at any place at any time. Music is finally completely... free!

In the present day, at the beginning of the 21st century, the theories and visions of Adorno and Benjamin have become outdated. Now that the original version is gone, all the copies are gone, and music comes to us by pressing on the buttons of something that is half the size of a matchbox containing tens of thousands of titles, a new theory on music appreciation in the digital age is needed. The romanticism of and mourning for the loss of the good old days and complaints about the new will go on for a while, but this only signifies that a new theory on the aesthetics of listening to music is missing. What will the new aesthetic of music in the digital age, and the age of globalisation look like?

The new aesthetic of listening to music has to take into account that music is seen as a free commodity. Music sounds all the time but is almost completely invisible. Music surrounds us all the time in public places or from the plugs in our ears. Small ear plugs or big headphones: size and colour have to match with our attire. Music is free of charge, free of rights, free of bonds: the dreams of hippies from the 1960s have come true. The general attitude is that one has to pay for the carrier, be it the most fancy and flashy latest iPod or just an invisible but powerful memory card in your portable phone, but not for the music itself.

The consequences of this new attitude towards music are just beginning to be realised by anyone involved in the music business and music education. Business people seem to be the least amused. Of course they are right to ask for strong measures against those who make use of this freedom for illicit commercial gain, but at the same time schoolchildren and the general public are being