

# Introduction

## The Informal Adès

Instability is a recurring theme in Thomas Adès's book of interviews, *Full of Noises*. Adès declares on the book's second page: "Where there is life . . . there is no stability."<sup>1</sup> Adès continues, however, by executing what proves to be only the first of several U-turns in the book: "a lot of musical material—maybe all—tends to desire stability or resolution of some kind, unless it's held in a kind of equilibrium, which is still a volatile situation. That's the way I understand everything in . . . musical history. The music we listen to is the residue of an endless search for stability."<sup>2</sup> I would continue Adès's observation by noting that the music he has composed enacts this restless quest through its kaleidoscopic contexts and incompatibilities. It is virtually impossible to succinctly describe Adès's sound world because it is so expansive. In *The Lover in Winter* we encounter an arctic austerity possible only by means of the Latin setting for countertenor; we hear the sheer camp exuberance of *Powder Her Face*; in *Asyla*, we move from the mysterious opening to the ecstatic "rave" movement in the course of a dozen minutes; elsewhere we encounter an almost crystalline formalism, as in *Polaris*. Any representative cross section of his compositions would reveal similar striations of apparently contradictory or incompatible musical thought. Though he is unmistakably a rigorous formalist composer, his work is also notable for its referential character, for its opulence and its improbable combination of delirium and refinement. In denying us any sense of stability he simultaneously enchants us, and that is why I decided to write this book.

The volume you are holding now is an introduction to those who are curious about but unfamiliar with recurring themes in Adès's music, from the beginning of his career in 1989 until his 2016 opera *The Exterminating Angel*; it is an epistle to my colleagues who have engaged in scholarly study of Adès; it is an appreciation for readers who are already familiar with Adès's work. This book is not "balanced"—or, should I say, "stable"—in terms of its consideration of Adès's music: his piano piece *Traced Overhead* hardly makes an appearance, and his landmark *Asyla* is considered mostly in passing. I have spent considerable time, by contrast, contemplating the significance of his

arrangements of both his own works and the works of others. These decisions have been made largely because of my personal reactions to Adès's music, though some of them are grounded in the broader scholarly frame in which this book exists. For example, Ed Venn has written an entire book on *Asyla*, and I refer the reader to his scholarship—and the work of many others—throughout the course of this study.

I take what I call, for lack of a better term, an “informal” approach, not only because it suits my own temperament, but also because it suits the sensibility of the composer who is my subject. I use *informality* here in the everyday sense of the word, but also in a more specific sense: the sense that Adès is a composer who deserves as nimble a consideration as I may hope to provide, because his own approach to creating music has consistently involved a process of aesthetic discovery that resists a single thoroughgoing analytical or conceptual lens.

This conventional notion of informality is easy enough to understand; I am borrowing the second sense of the word from Theodor Adorno and his 1961 essay “Vers une musique informelle.” Adorno is hardly an obvious place to go looking for a better vantage point for Adès's music. Adorno decries fetishism; Adès finds what he calls “fetish notes” underappreciated. Adorno is overwhelmingly concerned with Schoenberg and Webern in his essay; Adès's affinities with Berg are more palpable than with those others in the Second Viennese School. Adorno was famously hostile to the culture industry; Adès is a voracious enthusiast for music, art, and literature that strikes his fancy, no matter what its source or popular appeal might be. Moreover, “Vers une musique informelle” lies somewhat outside of the center of Adorno's philosophical preoccupations and is a late essay that has received relatively little attention from scholars and critics.<sup>3</sup> It was written from Adorno's vantage point as an *éminence grise* at Darmstadt, where the consequences of postwar formalism were starting to seem to Adorno like an aesthetic cul-de-sac. Hence the first, most general point of connection is to note that Adès came of age in an era of seeming dead ends, as well: the diverse practices lumped together under postmodernism seemed to have a limited future after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 (the year of Adès's first published composition), and the quest for a vocabulary that would describe overarching cultural forces after the heyday of postmodernism has become something of a cottage industry since 9/11.

Adorno proposed the ideal of an “informal” music because he felt that both neoclassicism and total serialism had no real future on account of their ideological rigidity. He tells us at the beginning of the essay that his subject matter will be slippery: “*Musique informelle* resists definition in the botanical terms

of the positivists. If there is a tendency, an actual trend, which the word serves to bring into focus, it is one which mocks all efforts at definition.” Without saying exactly what it is, Adorno “stake[s] out the parameters” of a *musique informelle*: it is

a type of music which has discarded all forms which are external or abstract or which confront it in an inflexible way. At the same time, although such music should be completely free of anything irreducibly alien to itself or superimposed on it, it should nevertheless constitute itself in an objectively compelling way, in the musical substance itself, and not in terms of external laws.<sup>4</sup>

In Adorno’s mind, music that has achieved this ideal will be more fully alive, animated from within by the intentional interventions of the composer.<sup>5</sup> Adorno’s path forward (toward, let’s not forget, a horizon, rather than a specific practice), relied on a recuperation of musical subjectivity into contemporary practice that he felt had become preoccupied with objectivity in different guises. There is no room in Adorno’s utopia for the abdication of intentionality (Boulez, Cage) or for historicist forms embraced for their perceived objectivity (Stravinsky).

This is the second point of connection between Adorno’s imagined future and Adès’s path as a composer. Adorno’s *musique informelle* at the very least asks us not to compartmentalize two of the most important dimensions of Adès’s work: first, his retrospective gaze and apparently endless appetite for allusion and the play of musical surfaces, and second, his formidable technical capability. These two trends are mutually ensnared for Adès; consider how admirably he speaks of Berg’s *Lulu* as a work in which “the formal processes are so overgrown that they cease to advertise themselves.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, if we take seriously Adorno’s vision of a music that has “discarded all forms which are external or abstract,” we might start to view apparently contradictory dimensions of Adès’s work as emanating from a common font. For example, Adès has consistently insisted on the sovereignty of musical material—“notes want certain things,” in his own formulation. At the same time, he is a composer who has become known for his fascination with surface elements that signal their meanings through the shared convention of musical styles—consider for example his prominent use of various dance forms in *Totentanz*. From one perspective the ostensible inevitability lurking behind “notes wanting certain things” may seem to be at cross-purposes with the imperatives of composing in a particular vernacular or genre. I would argue, however, that these apparent contradictions are merely distinct impulses in a larger equation that keeps subjective and objective dimensions in a tense dialectic.

For Adorno, *musique informelle* emanates from a shifting balance between material, composition, and idiom, and this is an instructive dynamic for considering Adès. The layers of accumulated signification in a work like *In Seven Days*, for example, go hand in hand with extremely strict formal processes, contributing to the work's seemingly infinite "spiral" of material, as Adès calls it. The third movement of *In Seven Days*, with its elaborate serial processes, which themselves are contained within a variation form in a programmatic context, provides just one example of the *informelle* in practice. What was once seen as the absence of intentional sculpting of the music for Adorno (a rigid serial process, eliminating subjectivity) becomes rather an idiom for Adès, a means to mediate between the transcendent and the immanent. Subjectivity and idiom are bound up in other ways in *In Seven Days*. Adès tells us that the piano part is also symbolic of human consciousness, serving to explain its hulking presence in the sixth movement. We will return to *In Seven Days* in due course; the point to note now is that this work illuminates one of the ways that Adès's music mediates between subjective and objective modes of signification.

It makes sense to be informal toward Adorno's *musique informelle*: anyone with a passing familiarity with Adès's compositions would see the folly of pursuing Adorno's notion of an informal music as a single explanatory lens for Adès's work. One limitation of Adorno's *musique informelle* is its hermeticism. Opera hardly makes an appearance in Adorno's essay; Adès's three operas lay at the heart of his output. Furthermore, Adorno's theory does not engage with an important feature of Adès's work: its so-called "pseudomorphism," or the quality of his music that draws on metaphors from the visual and narrative arts.<sup>7</sup> If some of Adès's worldview is elucidated by Adorno's utopian ruminations about a music whose exquisitely calibrated consequentiality gives rise to perfectly liberated musical experiences, there are also qualities of Adès's work which reveal an exuberant embrace of the world and a constant move between the formalistic and the referential. It is this very oscillation that is the center of the idea of metamodernism, a conceptual framework that has received its most thorough exposition in Timotheus Vermeulen's and Robin van den Akker's 2010 essay "Notes on Metamodernism."<sup>8</sup> Metamodernism is, like *musique informelle*, a somewhat obscure way of looking at recent composition and artwork. I have selected it not for its notoriety, but rather for its way of opening a potentially rich vein of inquiry. Metamodernism, like Adorno's essay, is a trailhead, not a map.<sup>9</sup>

Vermeulen and Van den Akker have explored the idea that visual artists, architects, and filmmakers are beginning to synthesize elements of postmodernism and modernism into works that reflect new "structures of feeling" that

are peculiar to the twenty-first century.<sup>10</sup> Vermeulen and Van den Akker are not, strictly speaking, dialectical in their approach. There is no grand synthesis at the end of their analysis. Rather, metamodernist work, in their formulation, “oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.”<sup>11</sup> Metamodernism is not so much a set of practices as it is a sensibility, and the sheer diversity of Adès’s output makes it at first glance a comfortable fit: consider the wildly different worlds of *Polaris*, the Piano Quintet, and *Life Story*.

Other commentators on Adès have described his music along similar lines. In a 1999 article about Adès, Richard Taruskin proposed that Adès had successfully managed to “buck sterile utopia while avoiding the opposing pitfall of ironic pastiche.”<sup>12</sup> In a parallel vein, Venn singled out Arnold Whittall’s notion of a “‘continuing, intensifying dialogue’ between opposing tendencies” as central to an understanding of Adès and other contemporary composers.<sup>13</sup> What all these writers would probably agree on when it comes to Adès is that the representational and the formal, the postmodern and the modern, the “dispersive” and the “unifying” (to borrow the art historian Molly Warnock’s terms) seem to be mutually constitutive in many of his compositions.<sup>14</sup> And while Vermeulen and Van den Akker may overstate the case for the absolute novelty of metamodernism’s structures of feeling in the twenty-first century—visual artists like Jean Arp, Simon Hantaï, and Sigmar Polke were exploring similar oscillations decades before Adès, and Vermeulen and Van den Akker themselves discuss the performance art of Bas Jan Ader, who died in 1975—metamodernism nevertheless forms an approach to contemplating Adès which brings in to focus his contributions not only to contemporary composition but the broader contemporary art world.

I hope to persuade the reader by the end of this book that a so-called “informal” approach to Adès provides an understanding of him that we would otherwise lack. The importance of “influence” provides one clear consequence of such a worldview. Whittall has noted the “pleasure of allusion” in Adès’s relationship to existing music, distinguishing this stance from Harold Bloom’s more widely used (and abused) “anxiety of influence.” Yet Adès offered his own peculiar view of influence in *Full of Noises* in a discussion of Stravinsky: “I’m fortunate in that I love everything he did and find so much to learn from. I think you will get further if you’re learning from examples that you can’t replicate that easily, that run counter to your own nature . . . Often with influences, one is a face at the window, looking in on something one wants.” In contrast to what he calls the “volatility” of his own music, Adès explains, “part of the fascination for me of Stravinsky’s writing is

that it's almost as though his ink has a kind of built-in fixative. The moment the note hits the paper, bang, it sticks. Like a dart in a dartboard."<sup>15</sup> In other words, if we take Adès's comments at face value, influence in his mind is rather upside down: we should be looking for composers rather *unlike* Adès as potential loci for his personal influences. If we don't take Adès at face value (or, more precisely, characterize this upside-downness as just one impulse among many constituting his sonic world), we need not abandon the more obvious points of reference for his work. Even though Adès himself has resisted the comparison, I argue that his opera *The Tempest* is almost unavoidably in conversation with Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In other words, influence in Adès's case might be seen as a negotiation of different models of the phenomenon, between anxiety and pleasure, between affinity and difference, between his notes and his words. Balancing all of the contrasting impulses is no easy historiographic task—and my views here are almost certain to require further qualification as Adès continues to compose. At the same time, I hope to offer some ways of understanding a few of the beguiling contradictions in Adès's music.

This book, like every book, is also a book about its author. I moved from a professorship at an American university to a career in the technology world over the course of writing these essays. As such, the ghosts of academic debates haunt these pages, while toward the end of the writing process (which is not to say toward the end of the book) I became more concerned about impressing upon the reader the broader cultural significance of Adès's music. Central to that significance are the contradictions that inform the composer's idiom and musical vision. In five essays that are more or less independent from one another I have sought to move between resolutely different modes of reading, some of the time "subjective" (or allusive, or extrageneric) and elsewhere "objective" (or analytical, or focused on "the notes themselves.") I begin with a consideration of Adès's compositions written in reference to a preexisting musical work, whether his own or by another composer—an allusive process if there ever was one. In the second chapter, I turn my attention toward a more strictly analytical practice by contemplating his ambivalent embrace of serialism. The last three chapters explore ways that Adès negotiates this divide between subject and object, first in *The Tempest*, then in Adès's so-called surrealist works, and finally in his larger works written between 2006 and 2016.

One challenge for anyone writing on Adès is to fully absorb the dialectical way that his mind works, as revealed in *Full of Noises* and in so many of his compositions. Adès seems happy to hold many apparently contradictory ideas in his head at once as he composes, and I don't see why we shouldn't do the same as we listen to his work. The present study, therefore, cannot

truly begin until I have sounded my own note of instability. A historiography of Adès will necessarily be as tense and ambiguous as Adorno's *musique informelle* or Vermeulen and van den Akker's "metamodernism." But the inevitable frustrations that come with such an unsettled perspective are perhaps where the meaning ultimately lies. Commentators on Adès would do well to keep Adès's own maxim posted above their desk: "There is banality lurking in [all] directions."<sup>16</sup>