Since Antiquity, the mystique of music and its effect on society and the individual have held tremendous importance. Great philosophers such as Plato found that the study of music allows “rhythm and harmony [to] find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten” (qtd. in Mitchell). According to Plato, when one “receives this true education of the inner being [he] will most shrewdly perceive omissions or faults in art and nature… receive into his soul the good… become noble and good, justify blame, and hate the bad” (qtd. in Mitchell). The fabric of humanity, Plato argues, is explored and expressed through music. Self discovery, virtue, perspective, and expression—all of the facets of humanism that music unlocks—are not only beneficial to individuals but, much to Plato’s awareness, they are directly analogous to prosperity in society. But music, just like society, evolves and changes as history unfolds, begging the question: does our music today still express these same humanistic properties? Surely, western society has nurtured these humanistic virtues as it has progressed through time. Renowned musicologist Theodor Adorno’s work in the mid twentieth century, however, suggests otherwise.

Adorno’s observations on the emergence of new genres of popular music, particularly jazz, in the early 1900s suggests that the changes in musical style that arose in this period were really “the after-effect of the Fascist era” on not only society, but on music itself (“What Has National Socialism…” 373). According to Adorno, the “positivistic matter-of-factness” ideology birthed by the fascist era’s totalitarian governmental control plagued music with standardized structures that restricted freedom of expression in the realm of ethereal being that music possesses (“What Has National Socialism…” 373). Adorno argues that the spread of this ideology instigated a shift in society and in music from the sacred to the scientific. This shift resulted in a loss of the humanistic effects that “serious” music achieves through complexity of meaning. In place of complex meaning that achieved humanistic effects, Adorno argues, musicians began to favor a stylistic approach, establishing sterile, detail driven “popular” music that lingers in western society today (“What Has National Socialism…” 376).

It’s true that in the early 1900s there was an obvious shift from an antique sound to the more modern style that Adorno addresses; radio musicians today have much more in common with Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” than Beethoven’s 5th Symphony. But what is it that occurred? Adorno contends that “standardization” nestled into musical composition, mainly in outline and detail, creating an abundance of low-quality
composition without a shred of humanistic prop-
erty. Adorno asserts that popular music became so focused on embellishment that musicians are now ignorant of music’s whole structure; there-
fore, no tension is built and no complexity is thoroughly developed. This ignorance leaves no room for the listener to ponder and reflect upon the music; it is “predigested” and sickeningly declarative rather than metaphorically, symbolically, or even expressively (“On Popular Music...” 443).

Adorno’s argument is easy to sympathize with. Who would want to encourage poor, cheaply assembled music? And what true musician wants to abandon his artistic desires to create something new in favor of writing a stencil of a song that has already been written time and time before? This standardization would seem to be the destruction of music as an art—if there were truth to it. Adorno wants us to believe that modern music is created in a factory by a generic, faceless worker, each detail “function[ing] only as a cog in a machine” producing mass quantities of cheap goods rather than being assembled on a canvas by an artist attempting to form a new perspective through humanistic innovations (“On Popular Music...” 440). But in shunning the stylistic evolution that newly-emerging forms of popular music brought in the early 1900s, Adorno focuses his rancor solely on the compositional structure of music, rendering him ignorant to a vital aspect: the performance. The emergence of improvisations as a major aspect of music in this period opened infinite possibilities for musicians. With improvisation, a musical composition becomes a blank canvas begging to be filled with a masterpiece, and each performance paints a unique scene. The written piece no longer oppresses the musician, but rather the musician is encouraged to explore humanistic interpretation and fill this blank canvas with his own impressions. To put it simply, Adorno’s assertion that popular music lacks humanistic potential is too absolute. Although he is right to question this shift in how music is created, he is too quick to declare popular music completely non-
humanistic because of its standardization. Popular music can indeed employ humanistic qualities.

Before exploring the full scope of Adorno’s argument, it is necessary to discuss the value of standardization. Standardization of structure is nothing new to humanistic arts. Examine any period of art, literature, or music and standardized structure cannot be missed. Take for example poetry’s many different forms. The classic sonnet is confined to fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, yet poets have created some of their most compelling, creative works within that structure. Do Shakespeare’s famous sonnets seem sterile and drummed out without artistic implements? Adorno contends that this simplistic view of structure is the “contamination which makes the insight into the basic standardization of popular music sterile” (“On Popular Music...” 438). The confusion of “mechanical patterns” of standardization in popular music with the “highly organized strict art forms” of serious music supposedly causes this sterility; Adorno contends that the intelligent design behind the laws of the sonnet, an accepted true art-form, cannot be equally compared to the structure of a standard song in its restrictiveness (“On Popular Music...” 440). But is it the bindings of the sonnet form that make Shakespeare’s sonnets a treasure to the English language? Although structure can wield humanistic expression, it is merely one facet of expression. The eloquence of Shakespeare’s sonnets is alien to their structure; they adhere to the sonnet form only in their mechanics. I submit to Adorno in his assertion that music has adopted more standardization, but much like the laws of writing sonnets did not restrict Shakespeare’s artistic implements, the standardization found in popular music composition does not define the music itself; what is created within the form is what truly defines it and creates the modes of true humanistic expression.
This expression of humanism within standardized structures is most evident in the most prominent genre of American popular music the early 1900s: jazz. Jazz created a shift towards pure, complex, melody-driven music. Although jazz’s structural composition is rather simplistic, it offers musicians many opportunities for free expression through its core utilization of improvisation. Louis Armstrong’s 1928 recording of “West End Blues,” for example, is a rather simplistic multi-strain 12 bar blues composition with only subtle variation in the intro, the call and response segment, and a solo. However, “West End Blues” exemplifies such sincere emotion that it could stand up to any orchestral work. Even the experts agree: musician and writer Ben Sidran sees Armstrong as a maverick in the “balance of intellectual and emotional content” of this recording (61). This is clear even from the beginning of the recording, where Armstrong’s personal touch is undeniable: a stately, militaristic trumpet run springs forth with authority, only to be immediately juxtaposed at the zenith with an effortless ornamental downward run that says to the listener, “Let me show you how I do it. Let me show you how I can play.” This run leads to the simple harmony that smoothly supports Armstrong as he exposes his emotion for all to hear. But don’t let this simplicity of harmony fool you. Although the harmony may not appear unique, Sidran notes that, “the variety of Armstrong’s imposition of chord substitutions on minimal blues format [was] not a strictly worked out assault on Western harmonic structure but an evolved, intuitive manipulation;” his chord progression is not a mockery of “serious” music but a highly regarded evolution (61). As the song continues, the emotional tone and the deep feeling in his voice during the improvisation make the audience know that not only does he own this melody, but also that its authenticity cannot be questioned.

This authenticity in improvisation is embedded into jazz music because of the folk roots from which jazz was created. Folk music from the
Southern United States spread throughout the country by adopting “Western song forms and incorporating Western harmony” to create the new genre (Sidran 59). These folk roots allow musicians to be truly humanistic because folk music is not confined by traditional musical methods. It cannot be learned by reading music or by studying at conservatories; it can only be learned by ear. It is the music that comes from the emotion of the musicians’ soul within the moment. Folk music promotes performance as a purely humanistic endeavor in which musicians discover what they have the ability to play without relying on what is provided. There is no music to read; only the creative mind playing the music as though it is singing. This root in folk is what gives Louis Armstrong the ability to gush expression in his improvisations.

Adorno dismisses these improvisation sections as a veil for “pseudo-individualization of musical detail [that] creates the illusion of freedom” (“On Popular Music...” 445). But Adorno again simply cannot see past composition. When one considers the factors that allow for improvisation, it becomes clear why Adorno could argue that it is falsely individualistic. In order for a song to have an improvisation segment, two boundaries must be set: length and tonal key. Without both, the improvisation will clash and not fit within the context of the song; the predetermined length of the improvisation section allows the musicians to align, while the tonal key allows for the notes of the improvisation to logically fit on top with pleasant consonance. Adorno’s argument finds this freedom within a set boundary to not be freedom at all because the limitations and rules are collectively dictated, rather than being freely chosen by the individual. This “pseudo-individualization,” Adorno believes, is not a product of musicians but has stemmed from the oppression of the post-Fascist era, in which restriction of everyday life was commonplace.

But Adorno asserts this as though he has never truly analyzed a live improvisation. Before the introduction of improvisation, the performance of music was rigid, with only subtle variation from one performance to another. Before jazz, the composer’s authority was absolute; each note was specifically selected, allowing for only mindless duplication of the original piece. In complete contradiction to Adorno, jazz should be classified as the first real break from oppression; jazz critic J. A. Rogers, argues that, “Jazz is the joyous revolt from convention, custom and authority” (ctd in Sidran 54). Improvisation allowed for experimentation, and what could be more humanistic than free, exploratory experimentation?

Perhaps if we examine what Adorno finds to be truly humanistic music, his argument may gain more validity. Adorno treats the Romantic composer Beethoven as the idol of “good serious music” (“On Popular Music...” 441). What Adorno celebrates in Beethoven, and in all “serious” music, is that “the detail virtually contains the whole and leads to the exposition of the whole, while, at the same time, it is produced out of the conception of the whole” (“On Popular Music...” 441). Simplistically, Adorno finds that Beethovan’s meaning creates the arrangement of the piece. Take, for example, Beethoven’s *Appassionata*; the piece begins delicately as short bursts of segmented chords, circumscribed with care, lead into a sky-rocketing leap in momentum pushing forward to the recapitulation. The recapitulation varies on the beginning theme but with greater complexity and fervor through pounding drones and intensity. This approach allows Beethoven to freely attain the desired buildup of emotional tension through his arrangement of the structure: without the intro, the recapitulation could not achieve its desired effect. This attention to arrangement is essential in understanding what Adorno values in Beethoven. *Appassionata* contains a complexity of arrangement that only a true musical genius could assemble. This makes *Appassionata* completely unique, and its uniqueness subsequently promotes the freedom of individuality. But this individuality is ironically
spawned from a standardized compositional structure. Be it in Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, Mozart’s *Requiem*, or Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos*, Beethoven’s techniques for building tension were used countless times before Beethoven; in fact, they’re one of the foundations of orchestral composition.

So what makes Beethoven’s music “serious” rather than “popular”? Explicitly, I am not questioning the genius of Beethoven’s work. Thousands of articles can support Beethoven as being among the greatest composers to have ever lived. I truly agree with Adorno in his labeling of Beethoven as a renowned composer of “serious” music. But under equal examination, I contend that Adorno is wrong in finding Beethoven to be more humanistic in his compositional aspects than the jazz musicians of the early 1900s. Beethoven’s composition is no more (and perhaps less) groundbreaking than the works of early jazz artists like Louis Armstrong. Beethoven’s genius, just like Armstrong’s, is defined by his ability to work within a standardized compositional structure to develop a unique expression, and this is a vital aspect of humanism.

In summation, while Adorno sets out to analyze the stylistic shift in the popular music in the post-Fascist era, his conclusions appear biased towards his personal musical preferences. Even in his own work, Adorno acknowledges that he is “not concerned with bad serious music,” leaving his argument fundamentally lacking (“On Popular Music...” 441). In his effort to define what constitutes serious versus popular music, Adorno fails to grasp the full scope of his argument and simultaneously falls victim to the “matter-of-factness” ideology he is so critical of. If Adorno would have looked past the composition and analyzed the performance of popular music, he would have understood that structure is simply trivial when compared to the thousands of other details that music contains. Had Adorno come to this realization, he would have accomplished two things: he would have more accurately understood the free expression in jazz, and he would have discovered the humanistic elements within the newly evolved structures of popular music. Had he accomplished this, Adorno would have realized that humanism has never left music. Music has undeniably shifted in its creative approach, but this shift never changed music’s cardinal purpose: the expression, exploration, and discovery of humanistic achievements.

**Works Cited**


