It is undeniable that Adorno revolutionized the way of understanding the relationship between music and society as no other theorist in the orbit of the Frankfurt School, or even Marxism. According to him, music’s ultimate political meaningfulness lies in that music, as art in general, is the social antithesis of society. This antithesis, however, operates within the immanent logic of music, not at the level of social or communicative practices. Hence, Adorno is generally credited with a defence of modernism in music and is often seen as occupying a parallel position to that of Greenberg in visual arts. However, not only his praise of Mahler’s modernity (despite the obsolescence of his material), but also his late account of the relationship between the arts—let alone his criticism of total serialism—do not match the picture of Adorno as a purely modernist thinker of music.

Though the acknowledgment of Adorno’s importance for discussing music politically provides an important background for my paper, my aim is not to reassess his aesthetics of music as such. Rather, I will focus on the question of the politics of music and ask whether/how it is possible to make sense of it beyond the framework of modernism. In order to do so, I will draw on Rancière’s work without losing sight of Adorno’s main insights. Two reasons justify this move: first, the fact that Rancière unfolds his aesthetic-political approach to art (from The Distribution of the Sensible to Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art) against the background of an explicit criticism of both modernist and postmodernist discourses on art (which he blames for illegitimately linking a political understanding of art to a teleological conception of history); second, the conviction that, though Rancière’s pronouncements on music are rare (albeit not non-existent), the way he understands the (meta)politics of the arts as a reconfiguration of the “distribution of the sensible” (i.e., as a displacement of the borders between visible and invisible, intelligible and unintelligible, audible and inaudible) not only may be brought to bear on music, but shares a lot with Adorno’s most challenging claims on the unobvious political features of music.

From this perspective, my paper is an attempt both to discuss the relevance of Rancière’s work in the field of music, and to bring Adorno’s and Rancière’s main insights together so as to open up new paths of inquiry into the political significance of music under contemporary conditions.