

## Modern music subject to the impulse of rationalization. Development and consequences according to Max Weber

Teresa Isabel Espinel Granda  
*Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja*  
*isaespinel19.91@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** Rationalization constitutes one of the fundamental pillars in the development of modernity in the West. Max Weber uses this approach as a sociological foundation to reflect the historical context of this phenomenon. It focuses on the musical rationalization towards an approach of universality and standardization that favored the development of capitalism and its massive forms of production and consumption.

**Keywords:** rationalization; West; capitalism.

**Resumen:** La racionalización constituye uno de los pilares fundamentales en el desarrollo de la modernidad en Occidente. Max Weber utiliza este planteamiento como fundamento sociológico para reflejar el contexto histórico de este fenómeno. Enfoca la racionalización musical hacia un planteamiento de universalidad y estandarización que favoreció el desarrollo del capitalismo y sus formas masivas de producción y consumo.

**Palabras clave:** racionalización; Occidente; capitalismo.

## **Introduction**

This essay will address the issue of rationalization of music by answering the following question: How does Max Weber understand the development of modern music to be made subject of a “a drive toward rationality”? How does he depict the consequences of this process? Rationalization constitutes one of the fundamental pillars in the development of the modernity in the West. Max Weber uses this approach as a sociological foundation to reflect the historical context of this phenomenon. It focuses on the musical rationalization towards an approach of universality and standardization that favored the development of capitalism and its massive forms of production and consumption.

We will argue that work is the axis of life of capitalism, which has generated disconnection between entities consolidated in the Middle Ages, such as the Roman Catholic Church and musicians. This would leave to new guild organizations, scenarios, and roles for members in the field of music, during modernity. In addition, it will be argued that the search for the perfection of musical language, specifically the division of the octave, generates rationalization of musical harmony. It will also sustain that the new circumstances produce the abandonment of trust in the faith and generates mentalities of secularization where it is produced to sell and commercialize the musical art.

This essay follows a scheme of four sections, four central ideas of Max Weber’s thought that justify the rationalization of music. First, it starts with the criterion of the efficiency of the capitalistic organization of work. This approach is used to contextualize the ideal of progress and social transformation. Thus, it will indicate the musical consequences generated by this postulate. Second, the premise of the construction of a new social order is introduced, and how the relevance of musical activities favors the independence of the musician's work, this section also explains the musical consequences where the development of the division is narrated by the musical octave and the rationalization of harmony. Third, the tension

between rationality and irrationality will be presented as a product of a disenchantment of the ancient world. Finally, the breaking of the traditional principles and secular protagonist of the musical field.

## **1. Criterion of effectiveness, typical of the capitalistic organization of work**

The arrival of modernity and the reliance on reason, the calculable, and measurable had an impact on the process of rationalization of Western music. The Weberian theory (1993) argues that the evolution of music, as a social function, is configured within exact conceptual categories. In this way, music inherited traditional rules of a mathematically rationalized thought.

Rationalization represents the ideal of progress and social transformation. The development of capitalism favors work to be positioned as the central axis of economic forms, social structures, and political institutions. In the introduction to "Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism", Max Weber (1985) explains the term "universal" to understand the standardization of science and art in the West. In this way, industrial capitalism contributes to the musical development at the end of the Middle Ages with the appearance of the Gutenberg Press, showing an evolution towards a common and standardized language, favoring mass production methods.

However, capitalism does not fulfill its promise of evolution in all areas, but it generates consequences of oppression and rigidity in the work environment.

How disordered is life today at its very roots if its shuddering and rigidity are reflected even in a field no longer affected by empirical necessity, a field in which human beings hope to find a sanctuary from the pressure of horrifying norms, but which fulfills its promise to them by denying them what they expect of it. (Adorno 2004: xiii)

## **Musical consequences**

The increasing standardization of modern music has left the musical language exposed to a calculable aspect, which works with known means and rules,

and effective and standardized instruments. The organ, for example, is the instrument that most resembles a machine, arranging the interpreter for the sound conditions of this instrument. However, the evolution of the organ from the sixteenth century has been decisive in vocal and orchestral music, as it left the religious environments to move into everyday environments and led to the piano, known as a more discreet, small, and commercial instrument. On the other hand, the commercial production of string instruments, determined by a fixed construction, distribution, and acquisition market, favors commercialization.

## **2. The construction of a new order**

Modernity represents a new scenario of opportunities. Bureaucratic systems arise where workers position themselves throughout their work. For example, the musical organization of musicians in the 18th century and the fixed work opportunities within orchestras and courts reflect the social recognition and official labor of musicians' activity during this time.

Max Weber (1991) makes a comparative study to support this positioning:

The empirical skill of Occidental artists, develop on the grounds of craftsmanship; and their ambition, determined through cultural history and socially, and rationalist throughout, to raise their art a rank on par with a 'science' and thus secure an eternal meaning for it as well as social worth for themselves. (1991:142)

### **Musical consequences**

The development of tonality, the main chords, musical notation, and the tempered instruments, were some necessary aspects for the development of the musical culture of the West. The musical notation, the writing of music, provided the basis of musical commensurability, or musical measure, generating a historical evolution of the tonal system towards a greater rigidity. Weber analyzes the musical context taking into account that all harmonically rationalized music starts from the octave, understanding that rationalized music is that which is written on a pentagram.

Below are presented some key concepts to the rationalization of music:

The drive toward rationality, that is, the submission of an area of experience to calculable rules, is present here (in Western culture) ... This drive to reduce artistic creativity to the form of a calculable procedure based on comprehensible principles appears above all in music. Western tone intervals were known and calculated elsewhere. However, rational harmonic music, both counterpoint and harmony and the formation of tone material on the basis of three triads with the harmonic third, are peculiar to the West. So too is a chromatics and enharmonic interpreted in terms of harmony. Particular also to the West is the orchestra with its nucleus in the string quartet and organization of ensembles of wind instruments. In the West there appeared a system of notation making possible the composition of modern musical Works in a manner impossible otherwise. (Weber 1958: introduction- xxii)

Considering the importance of standardization of musical language, musical intervals are subject to a division. From the usual temperament, the octave is fragmented into twelve equal semitones. However, when dividing the octave in half, it is not an equal division but a division of musical fifth and fourth is generated, provoking consonances and dissonances that continuously seek resolution and rest in the three main chords or in the tonic.

Once the musical language is standardized the concept of transposition emerges, making the musical sounds a product of frequencies, susceptible to being alerted according to the interests of each musician.

Harmony also finds a new order in modernity. The study of music brought back the quadrivium (music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy) from the Middle Ages, analyzing music from a mystical character of uniformity, understanding sound as a regular and cyclical sphere as one commonly studies with the circle of fifths. This mysticism contemplates an irrational character that breaks with the arrival of rationalization, which seeks to demonstrate the numerical errors of that mysticism and proposes a structure of rational qualities. This mysticism has its origin in the Catholic monasteries where, through music, they sought to elevate the spirit.

The beginning of Western music is produced with the Gregorian chant from an incipient melody to a voice that, despite having musical accompaniment and text, represents the monody. Later, with the simultaneous sound of several voices, the monks began to add a melody parallel to the Gregorian chant, generating polyphony, usually regulated with a consonance criteria. This generates the multi-vocals and polyphony conceived from rational agreements to finally give way to independence and specificity of the musical language with respect to the other spheres, separating from the text and religious mysticism.

To understand the rationalization of musical form, a chronological description of evolutionary examples in terms of harmonic complexity is presented. The beginnings of the musical form were merely vocal, as is the case with cantatas, songs or hymns. Then they present a musical accompaniment to make way for the motet, the madrigals, and the masses. Next, we find the fugue and the opera as posthumous examples of the development of rationalization, then moving on to finding the traditional chamber or orchestra groups within concerts, and finally reaching the soloists, which follows a practical orientation of social character to spread their art within the schemes of the times.

### **3. The tension between rationality and irrationality**

Max Weber (1964) deals with the theme of "disenchantment of the world", referring to the loss of the unifying sense of individual existence, in the religious, both morally and aesthetically. This lack of meaning was essential for the imposition of rationalization and its primacy over any other dimension. Modernity follows an empirical universal search and is suspicious of all knowledge that comes primarily from faith.

The process of rationalization translates the conception of music for the spirit towards the conception of music for comprehension, all this encompasses an evolution in itself:

As a rule, the artistic [*das künstlerische Wollen*] itself gives birth to the technological means for problem-solving. ... there is no doubt that

music of the Wagnerian kind, and everything that came after it until Richard Strauss, involves technical preconditions of instrumentation and orchestration. However, here too we can at most speak about the 'conditions' which the artist had to 'reckon' with as given and indeed as having *barriers*, because what he must and *can* have with respect to 'technology' he will *create* for himself, but not technology for him. ...The question of the relation between artistic will and musical-technological means in this problem-area belongs only to music *history*. To *sociology*, however, belongs the other question concerning the relation between the "spirit" [*Geist*] of a particular music and the *overall* technological basis that influences the vital feeling and tempo of our present day ...metropolitan way of life. (Weber 2005:30-1)

Despite a process of rationalization so widespread in modernity, we cannot speak of a total depersonalization of the composer and his work but of a continuous search to intellectualize, dominate, and understand the incomprehensible. Hegel notes: "the actual region" of a composer's creation "remains a more formal inwardness, a pure sounding". (Hegel 1970: 141)

#### 4. Rupture of traditional principles

Practical rationalism arises from the Sociology of Religion (1997). The most radical consequence in the process of rationalization was the separation of the musical and religious spheres. This totally conditions the development of modernity since the Church had been the most relevant institution in the Middle Ages. The independence of both spheres occurs due to the differentiation of meanings between these two areas. In this way, music gains its own value by separating from the religious fraternity.

Music, precisely, being the "most interior" of the arts, is able to appear – in its own way, more purely, the instrumental music – as a substituted form – through its own legality of a reign that does not live interiorly – simulated and irresponsible, of religious life: the known position adopted by the Council of Trent was able to respond to this impression. The art passes to become a "divinization of the creature," concurrent power and deceptive phantasmagoria; to

portray and represent allegorically religious things constitutes, by itself, a blasphemy. (Weber 2006: 339, translated by Brittany Brown).

### **Musical consequences and secular protologism of the musical field**

In the seventeenth century, due to the posthumous developments of lyrical plays, the chapel masters composed secular music, especially opera, as this activity became the center of everyday life.

Karl Loewenstein describes his impression:

I had thought that music flows from emotional and esthetics sources; and I now grant in his [Weber's] words as he explained that music, too, has rational and sociological foundations. He pointed out that the competition of the private chapels of princes and prelates in Italy, France, and Germany in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had had a distinct influence on tonality; that hollow fifths, which were just then being heard again in Puccini's early operas, had been banished from music by the deliberate edict of a college of musicians in Florence; that the construction of musical instruments had influenced sonority and tonality; and, finally, that the tempering of the scale that was undertaken in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries - for example by Johann Sebastian Bach in his *Well-tempered clavichord*- had had rational and sociological motivations, and was not just the consequence of esthetic principles (Loewenstein 1996: 93).

By separating the religious from the musical, new meanings are given to practical experience as a means of expression. The execution is no longer at the service of something else but acquires a communicative value in itself. Although Max Weber downplays the aesthetics, with the development of virtuosity and talent, the interpreter is granted a purchasing value and a higher technical requirement, since, by using standardized musical instruments, it is feasible to generate new dynamics of production and consumption. However, the musical rationalization for the listener does not apply in the same consumption dynamics, but through music the experiential enjoyment is sought and not only the understanding of the musical effects.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, the theme of the rationalization of Western music in modernity has been explored according to the approaches of Max Weber, giving special importance to social constructs such as beliefs, mentalities, or worldviews, which are developed with progress towards the standardization and universality of resources, and both technical and scientific instruments. This essay analyzed the industrial character of the organizational process that is generated in the musical sphere and how this affects the spheres within a capitalistic society.

It has been argued that music and its context have been subject to the desire for rationality, and that its consequences are not merely musical but extend to the relevant areas of society, such as work (which is the center of the capitalistic organization), social order (union and labor organizations), tension between rationality and irrationality (product of the disenchantment of the world and full confidence in reason) and the breakdown of fundamental principles (secularization of the musical sphere). Likewise, music goes through a rationalized development, measurement, division, and musical notation, that reflects the standardization of a language and way of execution that favors the understanding of this art.

From this, it is fundamental to move towards new social considerations concerning the aesthetic field so little studied by Max Weber. To analyze this rational connection between industry and aesthetics, one must question whether production and consumption in the musical sphere are the ultimate destination of rationalization, or if the Weberian approach of rationality and irrationality gave an effective response to the development of modern society of the West.

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