Media as an invitation to rethink music education[1]

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Media, music, and the ukulele

I begin with a premise, which I'll illustrate with a story, and then relate to three areas of philosophical concern. An expanded version of this talk with references is available on my website, www.matthewthibeault.com.

The premise is that of a relational or pragmatic stance toward technology; namely, that our wants, needs, values, and practices both shape and are shaped by technological innovation. In other words, we both change and are changed by technology.[2]

My wife and I experienced this after the birth of our son. Early on, I connected to him through singing and playing the ukulele. He wanted to play, too, grabbing and strumming with focus and determination.

My wife suggested I record an album of our songs for car rides, a need the fulfillment of which was only made possible via recording. Listening to takes, I became self-conscious: less forgiving of intonation issues, more worried how others might critique me. Recording allowed multiple takes and edits, and songs I had simply sung and strummed grew into multipart arrangements with overdubs, solos,

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[1] This paper was given as a talk at the 2012 National Association for Music Education conference in Saint Louis, as part of the Philosophy Special Research Interest Group session organized by Cathy Benedict, "Music Education in the Age of YouTube: Media Immediacy and Philosophical Thinking." Co-presenters were John Kratus, Carlos Rodriguez, and Janice Waldron. Channing A. Paluck and Joe Wachtel provided helpful comments on the first half of this paper. This paper represents two five-minute presentations, the first of which was given as a movie, which can be viewed on my website: www.matthewthibeault.com

[2] This is my own formulation of a pragmatic stance, derived from communications with Nicholas Burbules and also following Hickman (2001).

and vocal harmonies I could never recreate live. Compression, reverb, equalization, and other mastering techniques shaped aesthetic values that further transformed the music.

The album was a hit—it soothed my son on drives and placated him while my wife exercised in our home gym. But our face-to-face musical practices also changed. I began to play my solos the same as the recordings, and follow the recorded arrangements exactly. Worst of all, the recordings made me less likely to pick up the actual ukulele at times. Our music, the source of joy and connection became, at times, a way to distract or disconnect from my son.

A philosophical view of music education in the media context

Just as media entered my family's life, it has become the central context within the lives of students music education serves, and philosophy has a critical role to play. Larry Hickman (2001) writes[3], "The role of the philosopher is to provide fresh ideas so that specialists… can determine whether their cherished ideas and values are in fact appropriate to their changed and changing circumstances" (p. 25). Music educators must reexamine our ideas and values in light of these changed circumstances.

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[3] Here's a slightly longer version of this quote, which I chose to truncate due to the time constraints of the talk: "The role of the philosopher in these contexts is of course not to tell physicians, farmers, environmentalists, and others what to think, but to alert them to possible ways in which their thinking about matters of importance to their own endeavors may be improved. The role of the philosopher is to provide fresh ideas so that specialists in these fields can determine whether their cherished ideas and values are in fact appropriate to their changed and changing circumstances" (p. 25).

I want to briefly open up three concerns for philosophical consideration, concerns driven by our changing circumstances: commoditization, efficiency, and sound fidelity.

First, commoditization has been explored through what Albert Borgmann (1984, 2005) terms the device paradigm. Following Heidegger (1977), he finds the character of contemporary life dominated by technologies that reduce once rich social practices to mere commodities. Music, available previously only face-to-face, rich with social connection and requiring significant skill, is often now a commodity experienced via devices, speakers that recede into the background. And just as my own face-to-face musical experiences changed once recordings were part of the ecology, all music education exists within this context in ways that deserve much more attention.

The second concern is efficiency. Philosophers such as Andrew Feenburg (2005; 1999) note that technological discourse is often dominated by instrumentalism and efficiency. With my son, recordings brought him music more efficiently, but this music was absent the rich engagement of our face-to-face relations.

A third concern is sound fidelity. Counteracting the commonsense view that recordings reflect reality, and that recording is somehow a form of cheating, Jonathan Sterne (2003) notes, "Sound fidelity is a story we tell ourselves to staple separate pieces of sonic reality together" (p. 219). Thus, music with my son existed in a live and mediated reality that must each be accorded understanding, exploration, and study to appreciate.

In closing, the pragmatic approach focuses on the interplay of wants, needs, values, and practices as we change and are changed by technology. Our profession's cherished values must be reconsidered given the profound changes in our circumstances. My experience making music provides a simple example, and Borgmann, Feenburg, Hickman, and Sterne illuminate issues that demand philosophical attention: commoditization, efficiency, and fidelity. Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to our discussion.

Illuminating two possible media-aware approaches to music education[4]

The reconsideration of our cherished values could produce many credible responses, but here I'd like to focus on two options that represent very different options, the establishment of focal practices recommended by Borgmann, and a Deweyan approach referred to by David Waddington (2010) as "critical transparency" or "technological transparency."

Borgmann's approach: reestablish focal practices

Given that media is the context within which music education functions, it does not follow that we need to abandon the practices that we hold dear. In the view of Borgmann articulated in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (1984), given the rampant commoditization of the device paradigm, what is needed is the reestablishment of activities that restore a social focus, that restore skill, that restore the complex web of relations that are essential for humanity. Critical for Borgmann is that these are seen as part of the overall pattern of technology, a way

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[4] In the presentation of the paper, the remainder of the paper was delivered live, following a discussion of the paper up to this point.

to deepen engagement and understanding, not to reject technology for what it is. Directly confronting issues of commoditization and efficiency, he writes, "If we are to challenge *the rule of technology*, we can only do so through *the practice of engagement*" (p. 207).

To teach music as a focal practice, one must work to make sure engagement is at the forefront. In this view, teachers would need to reestablish the values unique to live performance, the possibilities for connection and communion, the opportunity to know that the audience and performers are connected and in transaction with one another, and to make sure that opportunities for connection within these events are expanded, not compromised. For Borgmann, the purpose of focal practices is not merely to make a richer life possible, but to connect experiences, so that the opportunity to play an instrument or sing or compose makes a richer experience with the commodities of recordings more likely.

This approach might also embrace what musicologist Tom Turino (2008) calls *participatory music*, where distinctions between performer and audience do not exist, only participants and potential participants. Music such as this is found in festivals, dances, poetry slams, ukulele hootenannies, and other venues. Whether a symphony concert or a hip-hop battle, to reorient music education toward focal practices would preserve more traditional approaches, but with a renewed purpose and direction.

Dewey's approach: Technological transparency

Another option for music education to embrace, one that addresses the issues inherent in Sterne's critique of sound fidelity, is the call for technological

transparency in education that dates back at least to the 1899 publication of John

Dewey's *School and Society* (1990). As educational philosopher David Waddington

(2010) notes:

> Throughout his career, Dewey maintained that one of the most important
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> influences upon social change was technological change. Therefore, he
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> reasoned, if one wanted to create a society in which citizens were able to
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> make deliberative democratic decisions about social change, one would have
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> to figure out a way to create citizens who understood technological change.
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> (p. 622)

Dewey's approach, education through occupation, deliberately exposes the

means for production hidden by technology. For music educators, production

includes all technological aspects of today's musical world.[5] In this view, music

educators should be responsible for helping their students to understand

technological change in music. Those who wish to embrace this approach would

incorporate aspects of recording and editing in the curriculum, and make

contemporary practices part of music education both for the ability of students to

participate in contemporary musical practices and also for them to understand how

these practices shape the music they hear. They might also embrace media as a

critical tool for education, teaching through media using the collegial pedagogy

approach (Chavéz & Soep, 2005). It is conceivable that programs operating under

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[5] In discussing today's musical world, and given the tight timeline for our presentations, I chose to skirt around a notion I have developed, one that characterizes today's world as "postperformance," which refers to the gradual decoupling of music from live performance given the rise of the Internet and new media. Those interested are directed to my piece on hip hop in *General Music Today* (2010), or perhaps to wait until summer, when my chapters in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Music Education* and the 2012 *NSSE Yearbook* are released.

this approach might radically reshape the notion of ensemble around recording projects, leaving concerts as secondary in favor of CD-release parties or online distribution and collaboration.

The context of media deserves much more attention than it has received, and philosophy can help to make sense of the changing wants, needs, values, and practices as we change and are changed by technology. As my own story illustrates, there are likely aspects of change that, perhaps owing to the longer trajectory that began with sound recording, are barely noticed in our daily lives. The critical point is, in the end, to be critical. To close with words from Raymond Williams (1974/2003), "...whether the theory and the practice can be changed will depend not on the fixed properties of the medium nor on the necessary character of its institutions, but on a continually renewable social action and struggle" (p. 138). To my fellow participants and members of the audience, thank you for your attention.

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