Columns

Media as an Invitation to Rethink Music Education

Matthew D. Thibeault

Abstract
This column explores from a philosophical perspective how sound recording and media create a context different in consequential ways for music education. The author relates the story of his connection to his son through the ukulele in two ways: first, through playing and singing together; and second, through a recording of their music. These differences are explored through a pragmatic approach to technology, with a focus on three issues: commoditization, efficiency, and sound fidelity. The author then explores two different kinds of responses that educators might explore in thinking about music education contexts and media awareness: an approach to focal practices following Borgmann, and the technological transparency approach recommended by Dewey.

Keywords
general music, John Dewey, media, music education, philosophy of music education

Media, Music, and the Ukulele

In this column, I examine some of the ways our entanglement with media results in musical experiences that are different enough to deserve our attention. I begin with a premise, which I’ll illustrate with a story, and then relate to three areas of philosophical concern. 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.

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. In fact, he first stood on his own to stand and strum my ukulele as I played with him. The uke was a central way we connected.

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 recorded, 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 blossomed effortlessly into multipart arrangements with overdubs, solos, 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 in our home—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,

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

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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)

We in music education must reexamine our ideas and val-
ues in light of the kinds of changed circumstances I illus-
trated through my ukulele experiences with my son.

I want to briefly address three concerns for philosophi-
cal consideration, concerns driven by our changing cir-
cumstances: 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 face-to-face musical experiences with my son changed once recordings were part of the ecology, all music education exists within this context in ways that deserve much more attention. We need continually to remember that most musical experiences today occur through speakers, as musicians recede into the background.

The second concern is efficiency. Philosophers such as Andrew Feenberg (1999, 2005) 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. And this efficiency likely changes our habits around live music: Although many still attend concerts, the ease and ubiquity of recorded music put pressure on musicians.

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). Clearly, when I play music with my son, this sonic reality is different in critically important ways from when I press Play on an MP3 player, invoking one of our recordings. My recordings with my son are a separate reality of practices, editing techniques, multiple takes, and so on. When both of us are involved in making music together, this is a fundamentally different practice than when we listen, even together, to our recordings. And our recordings clearly do more than capture what we do live—even if I were to simply record one of our live sessions, the choice and placement of the microphone and our awareness that we were recording would make the recording something very different from the act of performing outside of that reality. Thus, music with my son existed in a live and mediated reality that must each be accorded understanding, exploration, and study to appreciate on its own terms. This same truth scales up to reveal a set of concerns that have not yet received their due from music educators, a reckoning with musical practices constrained by various media in a variety of consequential ways.

A 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, Feenberg, Hickman, and Sterne illuminate issues that demand philosophical attention: commoditization, efficiency, and fidelity.

**Illuminating Two Possible Media-Aware Approaches to Music Education**

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 we hold dear. In the view of Borgmann articulated in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (1984), the rampant commoditization of the device paradigm invites the reestablishment of what he calls focal practices: activities that restore a social focus, that restore skill, that restore the complex web of relations essential for humanity. Critical for Borgmann is that these are seen as part of the overall pattern of technology, a way 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 ensure engagement is at the forefront. In this view, teachers would need continually to assert the values unique to live performance, the possibilities for connection and
communion, and the opportunity to know that 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. Those interested in Borgmann’s approach might be particularly on guard against trying to replicate the pristine experience of the recording, reclaiming the value of spontaneity and surprise rather than the reproducibility and perfectibility that characterize recordings. For Borgmann, the purpose of focal practices is not merely to make a richer life possible but also to connect experiences, so that the opportunity to play an instrument or sing or compose makes a richer experience, even with the commodities of recordings, more likely.

An approach resonant with Borgmann’s concerns might also embrace what the musicologist Tom Turino (2008) calls participatory music, where distinctions between performer and audience do not exist, replaced by a fluid boundary between 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 prepare 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 (2003) 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 the educational philosopher David Waddington (2010) notes,

> Throughout his career, Dewey maintained that one of the most important influences upon social change was technological change. Therefore, he reasoned, if one wanted to create a society in which citizens were able to make deliberative democratic decisions about social change, one would have to figure out a way to create citizens who understood technological change. (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.³ In this view, music educators have a responsibility to help their students to understand technological change in music. Those who wish to embrace Dewey’s approach might 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 (Chavac & Soep, 2005). It is conceivable that programs operating under this approach might radically reshape the notion of ensemble through recording projects, placing concerts alongside CD release parties or online distribution and collaboration.

The implications of various media for music education deserve more attention than they have received, and philosophy can help make sense of the changing wants, needs, values, and practices as we change and are changed by technology. As my son and my story illustrate, 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).

**Author’s Note**

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**Notes**

1. This is my own formulation of a pragmatic stance, derived from communications with Nicholas Burbules and also following Hickman (2001).
2. In the presentation of the article as a talk, the remainder of the article was delivered live, following a discussion of the article up to this point.
3. I have discussed an approach consonant with this through three recent publications (Thibeault, 2012a, 2012b, 2013).
References


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