Chapter 6
Pragmatism, Music's Import, and Music Teachers as Change Agents

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I approach the notion that music teachers can affect musical culture from the perspective of pragmatist philosophy, specifically that of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), who is widely regarded as the founder of pragmatism. Despite relative obscurity during his own lifetime, Peirce has had a major, if indirect, influence on philosophy over much of the past century; William James, George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty, among other notable philosophers, have all identified themselves as pragmatists and borrowed from Peirce in their writings. Numerous anthropologists and sociologists have turned to Peirce for guidance in recent years, owing to the uniquely comprehensive way in which he addressed matters of human cognition as well as the usefulness of his concepts for sorting out matters of cultural difference.[1] As the cultural makeup of schools has become increasingly diverse over the past several decades, more scholars have brought anthropological and sociological lenses to their studies of music education, so consideration of Peirce's perspectives seems particularly appropriate at present.

I will begin this chapter by providing an introduction to some of the basic concepts of Peirce's pragmatism, as well as a very brief account of *semiotic*, his attendant theory of cognition. Next, I will show how Peirce's philosophy might be used to illuminate the human phenomenon of "music," considering briefly the widely differing manifestations of music in different cultural contexts and its place in contemporary schooling. Finally, I will turn to issues that arise when one sees music teachers as change agents (see MayDay Group 1997, pp. xxxi–xxxvii, this volume), responding to related questions from the perspective of Peirce's pragmatism, using his concepts for clarification.

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Peirce's Pragmatism

Contrary to the prevailing Cartesian dualism of his time and place, Peirce based his philosophy on the fundamental premise that all phenomena—including matter and mind—are interconnected (or perhaps are different aspects of the same totality); he termed this premise *synechism* (Peirce MS949, Unpublished). With this principle as a foundation, Peirce noted that human beings born in different places and under different conditions develop different sets of *habits*, both physical and mental, to survive. He thus regarded different individuals as relatively unique "bundles of habits" (1931–1935, 6.228).

Peirce observed that when an individual encounters an interruption of his/her habitual survival patterns of thought and action, the individual experiences *doubt*. By making guesses or hypotheses (a process that Peirce termed *abduction* [1931–1935, 5.416]) and testing them to determine how a situation might be different from the way in which it was originally conceived, the individual has the possibility of resolving doubt. Once one of these hypotheses is confirmed, he/she is able to return to habitual mental action or *belief.*

Peirce noted that individuals who live together in the same circumstances tend to face similar challenges and develop shared habits of survival. In their interchanges, the members of a community thus also tend to experience the same doubts and to develop a shared comprehensive abduction of "the way the world is" (that is, a common worldview or conception of reality). Notably, the worldview held within any given community is inevitably partial and biased due to having its origins in its members' unique efforts toward survival. Therefore, the beliefs (or mental habits) of any given community are inevitably different from those of other communities, and they cannot be said to fully reveal true reality.

In order to understand the actions and ideas of a particular community, it follows that one must always consider them in terms of the *effects* they are conceived to have by its members. Peirce advanced the following "pragmatic maxim" for the purpose of making ideas "clear" (that is, identifying their meaning within the collective abduction or worldview of a community):

> Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (1931–1935, 5.402)

Accordingly, in Peirce's view, the *meaning* of any individual's thought or action stems from the efficacy it is believed to have within the habitual coping actions of the community to which the individual belongs; it is on this basis that a thought or action is (or is not) judged to be "sensible" or "reasonable" by the members of that community. (Today, of course, anthropologists typically use the term "cultural group" rather than "community.")

Semiotic

As an outgrowth of his pragmatic philosophy, *semiotic* is Peirce's theory of the *signs*—or foundational elements—of *all* cognition (which he termed *semiosis*). Semiotics is commonly defined as the "science of signs," the conceptual vocabulary of which continues to change and expand on the basis of research and reflection to provide more well-founded systematic accounts of cognition and communication. Along with Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), whom he did not know, Peirce is regarded as one of the founders of contemporary semiotics.

Peirce set forth the idea that every thought or *Sign* that registers in the consciousness of an individual human being should be regarded as involving an indivisible triadic relationship, the three aspects of which include: (1) a *Sign* (that is, a *perception* or *thought*), (2) an *Object* (that is, a *conception* of the perception), and (3) an *Interpretant* (that is, an effect in the mind of a perceiver according to which the Sign is conceptualized as an Object).[2] According to this model, two or more individuals, upon perceiving the same Sign, may conceptualize it differently (as an Object), owing to differences in their respective "habits of mind" (that is, their Interpretants). However, two other individuals may habitually conceptualize that Sign in largely the same way (that is, "be of one mind") if they are of the same community, owing to their having had experiences in common.[3] Extending this idea, it is important to note that a single individual might actually be a member of many different types of communities (for example, communities predicated on gender, ethnicity, nationality, language, or profession); thus his/her conceptualization of a given Sign may differ in some ways (and not in others) from that of another individual.

Furthermore, the ways in which individual human beings conceptualize particular Signs are not static. Peirce maintained that Signs, our conceptions of them (that is, as Objects), and our own "habits of mind" (that is, Interpretants) are continuously changing. It is through the "action, or influence" (1931–1935, 5.484) of Signs upon one another, which Peirce termed *semiosis*, that they change. Any given perception (as a Sign) may be conceptualized differently (as an Object) owing to its effect (Interpretant) on the same, continually changing individual over the course of that individual's lifetime. Notably, when an individual first consciously perceives a given Sign, it may be regarded as new *information*, as it has much new data to yield. However, as he/she encounters and reflects on the same Sign over a period of time, meeting it in a variety of social contexts, the Sign might become more *meaningful,* more well understood, and more well integrated into habitual patterns of belief, but also likely to yield less and less new information with each encounter.

This sketch of Peirce's semiotic is far from complete. Indeed, Peirce developed an elaborate typology of different types of Signs and Sign relationships that can be used for more detailed analysis of conceptualization and communication,[4] and familiarity with his phenomenology adds still more nuances to his semiotic model. Still, this brief account may give the reader an inkling of how Peirce's semiotic can be used to address differences in conceptualization among individuals of different cultural backgrounds.

A Pragmatic Conception of "Music"

Peirce's pragmatism provides a conceptual basis for addressing the question of *how* different forms of musical practice (or "musics") can be said to have human meaning and value. The diverse forms of musical practice manifested historically in different world societies can be considered in Peirce's pragmatic sense (that is, on the basis of their *effects*) as a diverse cluster of community-specific behaviors involving sound, many of which serve those who meaningfully participate in them as *means of psychological and social balancing* relative to the worldview they respectively manifest.[5] Stated in another way, many of the different forms of musical practice undertaken within different communities can be regarded as pragmatic means by which their members address psychological and social differences and tensions while simultaneously being collectively unified in ways generally consistent with the worldview they share. This view is generally supported by the work of researchers in neurobiology, cultural anthropology, and political science (Goble 1999).

Notably, a particular instance of musical practice may be of one of two general types, depending on the effect it has on the community within which it is undertaken. Some musical practices tend to bring about the psychophysiological reconciliation of individuals to the worldview (or conception of reality) already collectively shared by the community within which it takes place. Other forms of musical practice tend to make manifest a new conception of reality, the characteristics of which may have been latent in the "collective mind" of a community. In both cases, the members of the community are typically unified psychosocially in accord with a shared conception of reality via their engagement in a musical practice; this accounts for the broader cultural effects of musical practice.[6] Notably, the vocabulary of semiotics can be used to analyze different forms of musical practice and their resulting sound artifacts as Signs manifesting aspects of the worldview of those from whom they stem.

While the effects of musical practice described above tend to be readily evident in culturally homogeneous, traditional societies, numerous historical factors have contributed to obscuring recognition in developed nations of the common effects of different cultural groups' forms of musical practice. Among these factors, the advent and growth of culturally pluralistic, democratic types of societies; the emergence of and the confidence placed in the scientific method and its challenge to long-standing religious worldviews; and the invention and proliferation of printing, recording, and broadcast technologies (plus the attendant reification and marketing of music) have especially contributed to obscuring the association of particular forms of musical practice with the specific communities or cultural groups from which they stem (Goble 1999). Nevertheless, the vast majority of people living in pluralistic, democratic nations, like people in traditional societies, continue to engage in some way with a form of musical practice that reflects their community-particular values and their culturally distinctive patterns of cognition, primarily for reasons having to do with its psychosocially equilibrating—or balancing—effects.

Given this pragmatic conception of different cultural forms of musical practice, we can see that music education in the schools of pluralistic, democratic, and

technologically developed societies is a highly complex undertaking. Indeed, a single musical example or "cultural sound artifact" (as a Sign) may be conceptualized (as an Object) according to the varied *effects* it has in the minds of students in a given classroom (Interpretants) in myriad ways, depending on their respective cultural backgrounds, the relationships among their respective communities, the ways they conceptualize "musical practice" (for example, as religious activity, artistic creation, or entertainment), the value and importance they ascribe to it, the degree to which they value schooling, and numerous other factors.

A Pragmatic Response

With this background on Peirce's pragmatism and semiotic, plus the foregoing explanation of how they might be used to describe the human phenomenon "music," we can now turn to the issues of change agency in music as framed in Ideal #3 of The MayDay Group, considering these issues from Peirce's pragmatic perspective. The ideal is stated as follows:

> Since human musical actions create, sustain, and reshape musical cultures, music educators can and should formally channel this cultural process, influencing the directions in which it develops and the individual and collective human values it serves. (MayDay Group 1997; pp. xxxi–xxxvii, this volume.)

Notably, the foundational premise of this ideal, that "human musical actions create, sustain, and reshape musical cultures," is generally in agreement with the pragmatic perspective on music I described in the preceding section of this paper. Indeed, to undertake or participate in musical action is inevitably to engage in a form of "sonic semiosis," in which, depending on the nature of the musical practice, one has the possibility of contributing to the sustenance of an existing cultural group, bringing about its reshaping or creating a new one.

The assertion that follows, that "music educators can and should formally channel this cultural process, influencing the directions in which it develops and the individual and collective human values it serves," requires further exploration and comment. This assertion could likely be taken to suggest that its authors wish to empower music educators to promote *particular* human values (and thus, perhaps, not others) in their "formal channeling of cultural process." Such an assertion, left unqualified, could leave readers with the notion that its authors wish to advance the music teacher as an arbiter of cultural value, an instructional leader who may support the musical practices of one or more cultural groups (say, communities of musicians who are highly technically innovative), while discounting those of others (say, more reflective, "religious" musical communities).

However, the following paragraph advocates that teachers

> guide and expand the musical initiatives, alternatives, and levels of musical excellence of their students, going beyond what is otherwise already available outside of school, helping musical cultures to continue their respective developments, while building bridges for students to other musical expressions of culture (pp. xxxi–xxxvii, this volume).

The "formal channeling" advocated by the authors is thus best understood as positioning the teacher as a relatively impartial mediator, one who helps students to make fair and culturally accurate interpretations of musical phenomena and to actively engage in musical semiosis in ways appropriate to those cultural traditions from which the different forms of music introduced in the class stem. Viewed through the lens of pragmatism, such facilitation of students' cultural awareness and musical practice can be seen as an important way of contributing to their psychosocial health and their social understanding.

Certain issues arise when one begins to regard music teachers as change agents, and using Peirce's concepts to answer the related questions raised by the authors of the MayDay Group ideals (1997; pp. xxxi–xxxvii, this volume) will help to clarify them.

How can music teachers be more accountable for increasing the likelihood that their students will value musical participation throughout their lives?

Before addressing the issue of accountability, it seems appropriate to consider first the question of what music teachers might do to "increase the likelihood that their students will value musical participation throughout their lives." The usual (and pragmatically correct) answer to this question is that by enabling students to perform or otherwise engage meaningfully (and thus come to develop a sense of personal connection with a community) via a form of music that they can call their own during their youth, they will be more likely to remain musically active—and thus to value musical practice—throughout their lives. Conversely, individuals who do not have opportunity to develop such musical skills and engage meaningfully with music in their youth are less likely to make time for exploring such possibilities in their adult lives.

However, it is also important to consider that if students who do not develop such a sense of personal connection in their youth are enabled to *understand* the personal, social, and political importance of different forms of musical practice to those who undertake them, they may also be more likely to value and respect musical practices (their own and others') as important forms of human engagement throughout their lives. Conversely, individuals who have never learned about, say, the musical practices of different communities, the use of music in state societies to promote nationalistic identity and solidarity, or the use of music belonging to particular communities for the purpose of targeting specific audiences in advertising will likely be less able to think critically about other ways in which different forms of musical practice impact their own lives and the lives of others.

Now, the question of *how music teachers might be more accountable* for increasing students' valuing of musical participation throughout their lives raises semiotic questions of its own, as it brings consideration of multiple groups and their values into the conversation. Perhaps the most important question is: *To whom* should music educators be held accountable in this regard? Some possibilities might include parents, other music educators, school administrators, and the government of the society or state of which they are a part—or even the students themselves. However, since each of these groups typically has special interests and ways of holding

music educators accountable at present (in various ways), as well as protocols and traditions of its own for gathering such information, answering this question would require a more extensive semiotic analysis than there is room for here.

What can music teachers do to improve the individual, family, and society through the musical alternatives, initiatives, and choices made available and advanced through the school music curriculum?

From a pragmatic perspective, the word "improve" in this question may seem problematic. After all, one's perspective on whether musical alternatives, initiatives, and choices advanced via a school music curriculum do anything to "improve" one's life would seem to be largely relative to one's cultural background and beliefs. Indeed, the members of any cultural group are quite likely to regard engagement with *their own* music as a means of personal, familial, and societal betterment, simply because they personally find such benefit in the values manifested in their own forms of musical practice; the value of the music of others is, for them, less certain.

However, a growing body of research in recent years has suggested that musical practices themselves may contribute to human cognitive development, so it may soon be possible to argue that all individuals are actually "improved" via active participation in some form of musical practice.[7] At the same time, democracy has now largely been embraced as the most socially equitable and beneficial form of government worldwide,[8] so it is possible to argue that experiencing and coming to understand the musical practices and beliefs of different cultural groups—and thus developing greater intercultural awareness, sympathy, and tolerance—is likely to "improve" the quality of one's own life and one's society. Since musical diversity is a characteristic of culturally pluralistic nations, anything that helps students to understand different cultural forms of music as those with whom they originated experience them has the potential to foster a more knowledgeable and more tolerant society, one in which different forms of musical practice are seen as contributing to the well-being of its constituent individuals and communities. From this standpoint, the more widely differing musical practices the student can be introduced to *meaningfully* (that is, in a way that fosters sympathetic understanding of the personal and societal meanings they carry), the better.

Beyond this, however, by providing musically engaged students with a broader array of musical practices and ideas, music teachers can enable them, where possible and appropriate, to enrich and enhance the existing musical practices of their families and their communities, to facilitate musical choice making within them, and possibly even to mitigate socially destructive beliefs alive within their traditions (for example, racism, genderism). In this additional sense, music teachers may indeed improve the individual, family, and society through the musical alternatives, initiatives, and choices made available and advanced through the school music curriculum.

What strategies can be developed to promote, improve, and encourage the musical traditions of particular segments of society and, at the same time, help individuals

become sensitive to and more successful within musical cultures other than the ones in which they grew up?

First of all, it is important to note that, as with the initial statement of Ideal #3, the suggestion that music educators should undertake efforts to "promote, improve, and encourage the musical practices of *particular* segments of society" might seem to carry with it an implicit suggestion that the musical practices of *other* segments of society should not be advanced. However, as with the Ideal, the words that follow in this question point toward a greater inclusiveness. I have suggested elsewhere that to meet the contrasting goals of providing students with an experience of the *personal* importance of musical practice and fostering their understanding of its importance as a *global* phenomenon, the music education curriculum of any given school might begin with an exploration of the musical practices alive in the communities surrounding that school (of which the students are a part), and that the curriculum could then be expanded (in ever-widening concentric circles) to include musical practices beyond these communities as students progress from elementary through secondary school (Goble 1999, 456–461). Such a curriculum would serve to develop in students both a personal sense of music's importance and a growing awareness of the diversity of musical practices and the complexity of musical meanings in the world.

Indeed, helping students to become knowledgeable about, sensitive to, and more socially conversant and capable within communities other than the ones with which they have grown up would seem to be one of the primary roles of music education in a democratic society. As I have indicated above, pragmatist philosophy and semiotics are helpful conceptual tools that could be used for accounting for and describing the personal and social meanings that different cultural forms of music manifest for those who engage in them (and others).

How can the profession undertake a sustained campaign to reenergize musical life in society, and thus to expand the contributions of music to life?

Before addressing the matter of undertaking a "sustained campaign," it seems appropriate to consider the central assumption of this question—that is, that "musical life in society" is in need of being reenergized. Is this assumption valid? When one considers the high level at which people are engaged musically in *most* societies on virtually all continents at present, the answer would seem to be *No*. In fact, the tremendous amount of involvement in amateur and professional musical performance in various cultural traditions, engagement in musical creation and improvisation, listening to musical recordings, attendance at concerts, participation in community musical groups and events, and engagement in religious practices involving music throughout the world indicates that "musical life" is quite well energized in most societies at present.

Furthermore, the emergence of new technologies, such as live webcasting, satellite radio, and mp3 players, has done a tremendous amount to energize musical interests broadly, and karaoke machines and the website YouTube have done much to enliven musical amateurism in recent decades. Indeed, the emergence of new

software alone (for example, Finale®, GarageBand®, Guitar Hero®) has greatly expanded opportunities for musical engagement at a remarkably high level even among persons (in numerous cultural traditions) who have had no previous instruction in developing musical performance skills.

Thus, from a pragmatist perspective, a better question to ask might be: *What is it that might actually be in need of reenergizing?* Perhaps it is the institution of music education itself, which has—at certain times and places—tended to inhibit public recognition of the personal and social importance of certain forms of musical practice. Indeed, owing to a number of historical factors, some music educators have tended to focus their instruction on the replication and polished performance of musical *works* from a limited group of traditions, rather than considering the broader *personal and social effects* of *different cultural forms* of musical practice. However, once one considers different musical practices from a pragmatic perspective, as efficacious personal and social behaviors that are manifested differently in different cultural contexts, one can see that the participatory musical practices of different cultural groups all constitute "energized musical life."

Given this state of affairs, what may actually be needed is a "sustained campaign" to re-focus music education in a manner consistent with a pragmatic conception of musical practices such as I have described above. Once attention is turned toward consideration of the personal and social *effects* of particular forms of musical practice, the role and importance of music education in general education will be much clearer to students and all concerned. How might such a campaign be undertaken? Many members of the MayDay Group, with their pragmatic orientations and their focus on critical inquiry, their shared actions stemming from the group's Ideals, and their growing influence among music teacher educators, seem to be demonstrating just that.

Notes

1. While there has been an apparently newfound and growing interest in Peirce among social scientists in recent years, Peirce's writings actually had considerable influence on the development of sociology as a science in Europe and the United States. For an account of this development, see Kilpinen (2000).
2. These three aspects are derived from categories in Peirce's phenomenology. See Peirce 1931–1935, 2.274. Note that the word "Interpretant" does not denote an individual person as an "Interpreter," but rather an effect in the mind of a perceiver. Peirce wrote, "I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former." (Peirce 1977, 80–81.)
3. Peirce 1931–1935, 5.400. Notably, Peirce's conception of the *sign* prevents any analytical conceptions drawn from his philosophy from tending toward realism or toward an ungrounded, purely subjective idealism. (For purposes of clarity, I have followed Peirce's own frequent practice of capitalizing the words Sign, Object, and Intepretant when referring to the interrelated aspects of a sign, but I have not capitalized the word sign when referring to the totality. Note that Peirce himself was not consistent in this usage.)
4. He initially developed 10 major classes of signs, but later postulated 59,049 different classes.
5. For a more thorough explication of this assertion, see Goble 1999.

6. A more detailed account of such "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" forms of musical practice may be found in Goble 1999, 121–48, 190–92.
7. One important recent resource on music and human cognition research is Peretz and Zattore (2003).
8. Social researcher Francis Fukuyama (1992) made such an argument.

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