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Some thoughts on music education in relation to the shifting locus of musical experience, the contribution of the humanities, and the mythology of cyberculture¹

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I am extremely honored to be the recipient of the Outstanding Emerging Researcher Award. It is particularly humbling having experienced so many outstanding papers over the past three days. I began my undergraduate music education degree at Florida State twenty years ago and have many wonderful memories of the state, even though visitors to Tallahassee tend to think of they are in occupied Georgia.

The paper I submitted is long, and time is short, so I prepared a fifteen-minute talk aimed mostly to open up a final conversation. Before I begin, however, I would like to express my thanks to the conference organizers, the administration and staff at USF, the music education faculty, the student volunteers, and readers and reviewers for the OERA and SMERS. Last summer, Clint encouraged my submission to this conference over lunch—just one example of the focus, attention to detail, responsiveness, and unfailing enthusiasm that make him such an ambassador for this institution as well as our profession. Clint, thank

¹ This talk/acceptance speech was read as the closing session of the Suncoast Music Education Research Symposium in Tampa FL, Saturday February 9, 2013. It summarizes and discusses a much longer paper to be published in an upcoming issue of *Music Education Research International*. For more information, visit <http://cmer.arts.usf.edu/>

you. Not least, I would like to thank my wife and son for their love and support and making life fun.

As Ariel sings to Ferdinand in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "Nothing of him that doth fade,/ But doth suffer a sea-change,/ into something rich and strange." Navigating the future is a wonderful conference theme but a daunting task, and many in music education believe we are suffering a sea change. I will focus on three ideas from my paper to help navigate this change: first, I will provide an overview of the shifting locus of musical experience; second, I will examine one aspect of this shift, drawing from the humanities; and, third, I will critique a problematic mythologizing of cyberculture that too often characterizes our current efforts to improve music education.

The ability to record sound is acknowledged as a musical innovation unequalled in importance since the introduction of Western notation. My paper asserts that a related development requiring our attention is the shifting locus of musical experience over the past century. Sound recording did exist one hundred years ago, but most experiences with music were still had through live performance in face-to-face settings. Over subsequent decades, the majority of experience gradually shifted from face-to-face live toward recordings and broadcasts. And over the past decade or so, the locus of our experience has again shifted, toward digital media. For example, students today spend over eight hours a day with media, a third of that time multitasking, and 64% list YouTube as their primary venue for music listening. Walter Benjamin famously wrote in the 1930s not only about the rise of mechanically reproduced works, but *an age* of mechanical reproduction, and digital

reproduction characterizes our age. As I teach it, we have moved from performance, to recording, to data. From performance, to recording, and to data.

My paper calls for attention to the shifting locus because I believe it allows us to better understand the educational implications of changes in the intersection of people, practices, institutions, and technologies. I conceive of the locus not only as technological, but also social and cultural, positioning us to move beyond, for instance, talking only about YouTube superstars. Even a concert choir should be understood as deeply enmeshed with the shifting locus: from new competition for audience time outside and inside the concert hall; to audiences who expect more of performers, having heard so much edited, perfected and now Auto-Tuned music; and to the social significance of that concert as the world around it changes. Attention to the shifting locus allows us to explore the implications of the words of Karl Marx, who wrote, “The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.” If we believe, following Heidegger, that the essence of technology is nothing technological but that technology is the way being manifests itself in the modern world, attention to the shifting locus of experience might help to organize explorations of the changing nature of being. For me, this orientation has provided constant reminders that *all* musical experience bears the imprint of this shifting locus, that *all* students are connected to these changes, and that *all* of music education can benefit from reexamination in light of these changes.

To provide an example of the kinds of changes I write about in my paper, I turn to my second point, namely that our scholarly efforts benefit when we attend to the possibilities

of the humanities. As Clifford Geertz notes, the understanding of culture should “not [be] an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.” The humanities make key contributions to our interpretations, helping us to reach more generous conceptions of musical experience. As my mentor Elliot Eisner wrote, “The arts enable us to have experience we can have from no other source and through such experience to discover the range and variety of what we are capable of feeling.”

I turn now to one aspect of my paper, the exploration of musical experience in two short stories: James Joyce’s “The Dead,” which is set in 1904, and Richard Powers’s “Modulation,” set about a hundred years later. “The Dead,” takes place at a party thrown by a music teacher for her students and friends, at which they sing and play for each other and to dance with each other, exemplifying the hausmusik culture common to the time. They share stories of the voices they heard over dinner, with little common experience and some voices having passed before the time of others at the table. Music symbolizes connection within the ephemeral, songs like us living for a time, and then only in the memory of others. To read Joyce is to encounter music as social, ephemeral, scarce, and unique in its every presentation.

By contrast, Richard Powers's story “Modulation,” presents today’s rich and strange world of music as data. Rather than teachers and players, his characters are connected to music in new ways: a journalist studying the use of music by American forces in Iraq, an investigator of online file-trading working for the record industry, and an ethnomusicologist, a thinly-disguised version of Bruno Nettl who upon retirement finds he cannot remember a single

field recording he has made that hasn't ended up in a commercial. Although filled with music, only twice does "Modulation" approach the performances of "The Dead": once when a DJ remixes chiptune videogame themes at a festival, and another time when a boyfriend sings a lullaby through Skype to his lover halfway around the world.

The musical worlds depicted in these two stories could hardly be more different, but "Modulation" does contain a yearning for the musical experiences of times past, although achieving them in a different way. The central arc of the story concerns a computer virus that infects every music player on the planet, triggering the globally-synchronized playback of a single song. This song, never before heard, is an unforgettably moving experience, while at the same time one no one can precisely remember or transcribe after hearing. After playing one time, the virus disables the devices, leaving all without iPods, laptops, or streaming music.

In other words, it takes science fiction to provide us with something of the ephemeral nature of musical experience that was the sole reality of music during Joyce's time. The humanities give us a chance to subjectively explore this, to feel it. Just for a moment, think about the difference between the world for Joyce and Powers. Or, as I wrote in my chapter for the *Oxford Handbook*, imagine Lowell Mason in Birmingham England in 1852, about to finally hear Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Mason had been 32 years old when the work premiered, and after a 28-year wait he was 60. Imagine the eagerness and care with which you would listen, and the sense how quickly it all went by, perhaps never to return. That really is something to ponder.

My first two points today concerned the shifting locus of musical experience and the possibility of the humanities to open us up to better understanding that shift. My final point is a critique of what can be called the mythology of cyberculture. I believe many, including myself, have fallen for this mythology when trying to navigate technologically based change. I first really considered it during a discussion with Jonathan Sterne at the CIC conference at Illinois last October, and I know I have embraced this mythology in the past. The mythology of cyberculture exists in stories of digital technology driving change in both positive and negative directions, and the sense that today's creative renaissance was born from technology. The mythology underlies dreams of YouTube amateurs, GarageBand composers, and the iPhone ocarina app rescuing students from a life of passive consumerism. The mythology also perpetuates our technological nightmares of a digitally-driven death of concerts, displacement of musicians, and replacement of teachers.

My point is not that changes good and bad are occurring, but that the mythology of cyberculture hides how technology is only one aspect of change. We should examine and research technologies. But we seem today to require constant reminders that changes in music grow from a web of people, practices, institutions, and technologies mutually involved in the co-construction of changing labor realities, different gender constructions, changing leisure and entertainment practices, and evolving roles in the home.

The mythology of cyberculture also too often relies on accounts of the past where the history of participation and creativity fail to be acknowledged, and where participatory

culture has just been born. This makes it seem that *only* digital technology can give us the creativity and innovation we rightly celebrate today; but Samuel Barber, Thelonious Monk, Joni Mitchell, and millions of amateurs were creative before the iPad.

While the mythology of cyberculture is seductive, students and teachers deserve better from us. They deserve the best research we can produce, rich and engaging work that includes technology without overreliance and deification. The resurgence of amateurism, for instance, is not *solely* a result of technological change, but societal and institutional change accompanied by the resistance and political action of millions, and our accounts need to do the harder work to broaden our conceptions. It is a more challenging task to navigate such deep waters, but our profession will benefit from moving beyond the shallows of cyberculture.

In my brief talk today I made three points: first, that we can better navigate the future when we consider the shifting locus of musical experience from performance, to recording, to data; second, that our work can be enhanced with openness to the contributions of the humanities; and, third, that we must resist the siren-call of the mythology of cyberculture, keeping technology in its place alongside people, practices, and institutions. These are the inspirations for my work in general as well as this paper—to invite others to wonder, along with me, about this rich and strange sea change. What do these changes mean for young people who love music? And how will our work help develop music within our classrooms and the greater society?

At the close of this conference I hope many of you may feel as I do—not only ready, but eager to set sail into a future both rich and strange, equipped with a better sense of changing tides, and with preliminary maps of interesting ideas to explore for years to come. We cannot know where the seas will take us, but surely this conference, and the work of all of you, will play an important role in navigating the future of our profession. Thank you for your attention and I look forward to our conversation.