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On Musical and Educational Habit-Taking: Pragmatism, Sociology, and Music Education

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On Musical and Educational Habit-Taking
Pragmatism, Sociology, and Music Education

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Within the past quarter-century or so, an increasing number of scholars in the social sciences have cited aspects of pragmatism, a philosophical approach or tradition begun by Charles Sanders Peirce in the late nineteenth century, as the conceptual foundation for their studies of different societies and cultural groups. Neglected for a long time, Peirce has in recent years become widely regarded as the most original and versatile of all American philosophers, and many now consider him to be one of the foremost thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition.

Several factors contributed to Peirce's relative obscurity during his lifetime and over much of the past century. Owing to a difficult personality and personal scandals that are still not fully understood, he was never able to acquire a continuing position on a university faculty. Despite being a prolific writer, he was never able to complete a definitive exposition of his philosophy, which is now seen to have been evolving over the course of his life. Some of his work was assembled beginning in the 1930s in the multi-volume Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, but it is now widely recognized that this collection is more an agglomeration than a truly systematic collection of his writings; it has been a limited resource for scholars interested in his work. Finally, his thinking—which flew in the face of Cartesian dualism--was simply out-of-step with (or, arguably, nearly a century ahead of) that of most of his contemporaries.

Nevertheless, Peirce's thinking had a great impact on William James, Josiah Royce, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey, among others who, in identifying themselves as pragmatists, all shared in some measure his view on the importance of interpreting ideas or concepts in terms of their effects. All of these philosophers have had some influence on the social sciences and education over the past century, and some have

had impact upon music education scholarship and practice as well. The indirect influence of William James's version of pragmatism on American education (and music education in particular) via his influential work of 1890, *The Principles of Psychology*, has been cited and described by numerous historians. It is well known that G. H. Mead wrote influentially on various educational issues, including pedagogical practice and the relation of play to education. John Dewey's contribution to education through the Progressive Education movement influenced the teaching of all subjects in the American educational forum in a major way and provided the philosophical basis for music education textbooks.

Several music education scholars subsequently built on the contributions of these early pragmatists in their own philosophical writings. For example, Bennett Reimer argued that there were points of similarity between Dewey's pragmatism and the ideas of art- and music-oriented philosophers Susanne Langer and Leonard Meyer in his 1963 doctoral dissertation, and this work eventually served as a foundation for his highly influential 1970 publication, *A Philosophy of Music Education*. (It must be noted, however, that although this book did indeed stem from his Dewey-influenced dissertation, it cannot be said to be pragmatic in orientation; it has, rather, been criticized for its absolutistic adherence to notions advanced by Langer and Meyer.) Terry Gates built a philosophy of music education on the writings of Dewey in his 1974 dissertation, and his pragmatic perspective has guided his numerous important writings in the field. In 1988, Stephen J. Paul applied the symbolic interaction theory of George Herbert Mead to illustrate that justifications for music education grounded in aesthetic theory are problematic because they involve norms and values not usually found in the symbolic universe of music educators or their clientele groups. More recently, I used Peirce's pragmatism as a philosophical basis for arguing that different cultural forms of musical

activity should be studied in terms of their various *effects* in the social contexts in which they are undertaken, and that such a focus should provide the foundation for the creation of future music education curricula.  

In his recent historical-philosophical offering, *The Enormous Flywheel of Society: Pragmatism's Habitual Conception of Action and Social Theory*, Finnish scholar Erkki Kilpinen explores the historical development of pragmatism as a philosophy and describes its varying influence on the development of the social sciences in the United States. Simultaneously, he compares and contrasts its tenets with those of classical European sociology. Kilpinen's text provides fuel for an interest in pragmatism, sociological perspectives, and their implications for music education that has been growing recently among some music education scholars. In this article, I will describe key aspects of Peirce's original philosophy, briefly address Kilpinen's account of pragmatism and its manifestations in the thinking of social scientists, and, finally, point to some ways in which I think pragmatism and Kilpinen's illumination of its history might be especially relevant for music educators to consider at present.

**Aspects of Peirce's pragmatism**

Peirce adapted the term *pragmatism* from Kant, who had drawn a distinction in his own writings between that which is *practical* (i.e., concerning the will and action), and that which is *pragmatic* (i.e., related to consequences). Peirce's pragmatic maxim is a primary feature of his philosophy. He wrote: "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." In establishing this principle, Pierce intended to convey that the "clear" meaning of an idea or concept held by an individual invariably stems from the beliefs about it (regarding its *effects*) held by the community of which that individual is a part. The notion that an idea or concept should be evaluated on the basis of its *practical value* to the life of a
community is an oft-appearing misinterpretation—or perhaps attenuation—of Peirce's pragmatism. Peirce sought rather to make evident that the conceived effects of any idea or concept are context-particular and transitory.

Also central to Peirce's philosophy is the idea that a common attribute of everything in the universe is the tendency to take habits, and he saw human beings as no exception to this. In Peirce's view, human beings can be characterized as "bundles of habits," and their lives can be seen to be ordered by the "habits of mind" or beliefs that guide their actions. (An epistemological implication of this is that concepts of truth are relative or "relational.") The "habit" concept also provided the basis for Peirce's theory of cognition: He observed that when one encounters an interruption to one's habitual patterns of thought and action, one experiences doubt. Doubt may be resolved by abduction ("guess-making"), plus the testing of one or more hypotheses concerning how a situation might be different from the way in which one has previously understood it to be. Once one of the hypotheses is confirmed, one may return to habitual mental action or belief, in most cases reflecting a revised conception of "the way things are." Thus, in Peirce's view, "... the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action."  

Peirce recognized that communities, like individuals, experience both belief and doubt, and he observed that communities too may resolve their doubts in a variety of ways (such as adhering to long-held ideas with sheer persistence, deferring to the opinion of "authorities," or appealing to outmoded philosophical systems). However, Peirce asserted, the making and testing of hypotheses is the only method by which doubt may be truly satisfied; this was the central idea in his philosophy of science.

There are three additional, important points to note about Peirce's understanding of human cognition. First, Peirce saw the habit-taking nature of human beings and their freedom of thought and action as two related aspects of the human condition; without habit there could be no knowledge base, and without freedom there could be no meaningful change (i.e., influence of one person's or community's views upon those of
another) and no advancement of scientific knowledge (i.e., new discoveries). Also, Peirce did not regard the habit-taking nature of human beings as involuntary. Noting that we are all relatively conscious of and able to regulate our habits, he wrote, "Every man exercises more or less control over himself by means of modifying his own habits," and he recognized that the same could be said of communities. Finally, Peirce was aware that human action is not always guided strictly by reason, and that scientific efforts to account for human behavior are inherently limited. For example, he once observed ironically (in a discussion of the limitations of political economy), "[N]o coefficient of average stupidity is introduced and no coefficient of average sentimentality which could have been introduced into the formulae. Of course, their values would have to be determined for each class of society."  

It is interesting and important to note that, unlike the social scientists who have turned to his writings for guidance, Peirce had no particular interest in exploring differences among societies or cultural groups. His primary interest in philosophy was mind, and, like contemporary cognitive scientists, he was more interested in understanding and explaining the processes underlying human cognition. The social scientists who have recently turned to his pragmatism and his semiotic (i.e., his related model of cognition or "science of signs") have done so because they have found his philosophy flexible and difficult-to-assail and his subtle conceptual vocabulary useful for analysis of cultural differences.  

**Pragmatism and the social sciences**

Erkki Kilpinen's historical-philosophical study, *The Enormous Flywheel of Society* is a contribution to the relatively recent reassessment of the role of pragmatism in the development of the social sciences in the United States. Kilpinen draws his title from William James's observation: "Habit is the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most
precious conservative agent."\textsuperscript{17} Despite the prominent place he has given to James with this quotation, however, Kilpinen acknowledges the primacy of Peirce when he asserts that the core of all genuine pragmatist philosophy is "the conception of action as a
cyclical doubt-belief process, cohering around the actor's habitualty;"\textsuperscript{18} this notion was first articulated by Peirce.\textsuperscript{19}

Drawing on a discussion of Peirce's pragmatism in his early chapters, Kilpinen explains that a significant problem with the theorists of "classical European sociology" is that they did not give the concept of habit a sufficiently prominent place in their theorizing. In the received view of classical sociology (and in the writings of Émile Durkheim, in particular), he observes, "'habit' is something to be dichotomized against 'rational' action."\textsuperscript{20} Understandably, from a Peircian perspective (as described above), such a separation would undermine the validity of their analyses. Likewise, Kilpinen notes, a problem with some later theorists is that they do not regard habit as reflective, as involving humans' conscious and unconscious involvement with their own habit-taking; this too greatly limits their theories and their analyses. By contrast, the pragmatist philosophers and those sociologists influenced by them do not regard habit as non-reflective routine, but rather include human reflection as part of it. Kilpinen emphasizes, "Peirce and Dewey did not use separate columns for habitual and reflective action, they had a reflective conception of habit."\textsuperscript{21}

Kilpinen observes that some twentieth century sociologists (and their forebears) have held strictly utilitarian views, according to which the locus of human decision-making is situated in conscious, rational choice, as "acting" individuals choose between several possible courses of action. According to utilitarian perspectives, human beings' behaviors are motivated primarily by pleasure and pain, their decisions and actions stemming from concerns with their personal well-being. By contrast, he notes, classical sociology has shown that there are many more values in the human spectrum than those

taken into account by the utilitarians, values beyond "personal well-being determined by pleasure and pain." He stresses that because pragmatism has gone even further in its critique of utilitarianism, it has much to offer sociologists:

[Pragmatism] has all the time been sensitive to the moral dimension in social life, and how it is "premature," as James put it, to single out pain and pleasure as the main coordinates in action. The pursuit of utility is only a special part of the whole of human motivation, about this the two classical traditions, pragmatism and sociology, quite agree. In addition to this, pragmatism goes a step further: Calculation is but one of the many uses of human reason, even so that it can be shown to be a rather mechanistic and applicative special case among all the possibilities, some of which are capable also of advancing human thought, while keeping strictly within the domain of logic. The pragmatistic understanding of rationality thus circumscribes not only that of economics and utilitarian philosophy, but also that of conventional sociology, and is able to put each in its right place in the study of human social life.\textsuperscript{22}

Indeed, classical sociologists (such as Max Weber) were critical of the narrow utilitarian perspectives that had stemmed from Thomas Hobbes and Jeremy Bentham and subsequently influenced the likes of Talcott Parsons, but the pragmatists, especially Peirce and Dewey, went even further in stressing that human beings, in fact, put reason to many purposes, reflecting the great variety of their values.

In his early chapters, Kilpinen presents an account of the early pragmatist philosophers, particularly James, Royce, Mead, and Dewey, explaining how the thought of each both stems and differs from that of Peirce in certain ways. He discusses the influences against which each of the "pragmatistic sociologists" was arguing in his own time, comparing and contrasting the theories of Charles Cooley, Thorstein Veblen, William I. Thomas, and Arthur Bentley with the views of the "classical European sociologists," then tracing the emergence of sociological perspectives from the tradition of pragmatist philosophy.

Kilpinen explains, for example, that Charles Cooley, a colleague of Dewey who attended his classes on political philosophy, showed "how it is possible to transcend the

grand dilemma between the utilitarian and the norm-theoretical approaches, without having to succumb to either of these positions. He tells that the sociological contributions of Thorstein Veblen, who was a pupil of Peirce for a short time, stemmed from biological and anthropological interests that had their roots in pragmatism. He argues that William I. Thomas made explicit use of Peirce's theory of action without attributing it to pragmatism, and he shows its manifestations in Thomas's influential study, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. He explains how Arthur Bentley drew upon pragmatism in "attempting to fashion a tool" and provide a theory of action in his work in political sociology. In his final chapter, Kilpinen illustrates shortcomings in Talcott Parsons' early work, as Parsons' repugnance toward behaviorism caused him to eliminate the "habit-concept" from his theory; but he shows that Parsons' writings are more in line with pragmatism in certain other respects later in his life. Kilpinen's account is well informed and multi-layered, drawing numerous subtle distinctions between the theories of the writers whose thinking he explores. (It must also be noted, however, that the various threads Kilpinen has identified are rather difficult to follow owing to his circuitous manner of exposition, and his main points are often overwhelmed by his drawing of multiple interconnections among the various theorists; unfortunately, these characteristics, plus the lack of an index, severely limit the usefulness of his text as a reference.)

**Implications for music education**

Though Kilpinen makes no reference to music education (and almost none at all to music) in his book, his study provides helpful background information for anyone wishing to conduct sociological research in these fields. For that matter, his account of the differing emphases of the pragmatist philosophers and his historical critique of the agendas of the "pragmatistic sociologists" could provide a sort of philosophical compass for anyone intending to undertake a study of any society or social phenomenon. Of
course, the "habit concept" is now alive and well in contemporary sociological discourse, having as it does a central place in the writings of influential contemporary sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose own concept habitus coincides fairly well with the early pragmatists' notions.  

Still, Kilpinen's discussion of the ways in which this concept and the integrally related concept of "action as a cyclical doubt/belief process, cohering around the actor's habituality" take form (or, fail to take form) in the writings of different theorists may be helpful to those wishing to use and extend Bourdieu's conception in their own research. As Kilpinen notes, for example, "Dewey . . . distinguishes between a mechanical habit (= routine) and an intelligent (= reflexive) habit, [but] Bourdieu's habitus seems to fall somewhere in between."  

It seems unfortunate that Kilpinen did not introduce Peirce's semiotic--his theory of signs, which provides a heuristic conception of human cognition that is now being used by some social scientists in their societal and cultural studies--more directly in his account of Peirce's contributions. Including this content would have made his study yet more useful for scholars wishing to refine their own approaches to research. Peirce's triadic conception of the sign (which allows that an individual's potential interpretations may be largely determined by her or his "habits of mind," but does not necessarily entail cultural closure), and his extensive taxonomy of sign relationships (which provides for the drawing of distinctions and similarities between different conceptual frames) do indeed provide a subtle conceptual vocabulary that can be used for cultural analysis. (I have demonstrated at length elsewhere the usefulness of Peirce's semiotic for musicians and music educators wishing to explore systematically cultural relationships in "music."  

Notably, Kilpinen does draw upon aspects of Peirce's semiotic on occasion (e.g., to demonstrate a philosophical "kinship" between Peirce and Mead), but, disappointingly, he depends heavily at those times on the reader having prior knowledge of Peirce's terminology. Still, providing an introduction to semiotic was not one of

Kilpinen's primary purposes in completing this historical-philosophical study, so its marginal position in his book is a relatively minor shortcoming.

From my perspective, the greater value of Kilpinen's study for music educators lies in its teasing out of different viewpoints and its clarifying of different meanings in the philosophical viewpoints of the various pragmatist philosophers and sociological theorists it includes. In this respect, it models what it describes, and music educators would do well to follow Kilpinen's example. Past accounts of different musical traditions by music educators have often painted the differing characteristics of those traditions with a wide brush, focusing largely on the "physical artifacts" of music (i.e., instruments and scores) and "sound artifacts" (i.e., recordings), giving less detailed attention to characteristics of the relatively unique worldviews or "symbolic universes" of the peoples from which those traditions stem. In many music classrooms, "multicultural music education" has been manifested as a sort of musical tokenism, according to which the musics of many different peoples are introduced to students, sometimes with "appropriate socio-cultural attributions," but generally without in-depth study and discussion of what made each music meaningful and important to those with whom it originated. Even *Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education*, a text published by the U.S. Music Educators National Conference and widely hailed for its cultural inclusiveness, devotes much of its content to formal analyses of songs and other musical artifacts, descriptions of instruments, performance-based lesson instructions, and the like, but provides little specific information on the historical and social *importance* of the different musics to the people in the cultural traditions from which they stem.28 (To be fair, information on accessing such information via other sources is provided in bibliographies at the ends of the text's chapters, but, notably, few of these sources are proffered by publishers of "music education" materials.)

Stated in the language of pragmatism, this means that music educators have not always considered or addressed in their lessons how each of the forms of music they

include in their classes is reflective of the "habits of mind" or the beliefs (and actions) of the people from whose lives the music emanated in the first place. They have not often given attention to the dynamic, socially important effects of particular musics in their originating contexts or how the uses of music can be considered as "forms of action within the cyclical doubt-belief process" in particular communities. As a result, their students have missed learning, for example, how the lyrics of some African-American spirituals communicated important coded messages to slaves hopeful of crossing the Mason-Dixon line via the underground railroad during the U.S. civil war. Students have not explored how the fans of a certain pop star not only enjoy that artist's music, but also experience it as a vehicle for psycho-social stabilization, communication, and identity definition. Students have little idea that the increasing homogeneity of the songs they hear on the majority of U.S. radio stations of late stems from recent changes in U.S. media ownership laws, which are allowing a small group of large corporations to own more stations and promote nationally a selected pool of artists for financial gain, thereby diminishing other musicians' opportunities for radio broadcast.

Of course, music educators are not entirely to blame for this problem. As I (and others) have explained previously, music was marginalized as a social force beginning around the time democratic societies began emerging in the West. As the beliefs of different cultural groups became largely bracketed from the public forum, the meanings of different forms of "music" became detached from their social contexts, and the value of different forms of musical engagement as social practices became secondary to the marketable value of "music," considered generically as a sound artifact, as "entertainment." With the advent of publishing, broadcast, and recording technologies, the commodity value of music increased greatly, to the point that music educators’ “habits of mind” now tend toward a broad concern with the characteristics of particular sound artifacts as works of "art" and "entertainment" (and especially with the techniques

of their production and re-production) rather than interest in their particular socio-cultural meanings or effects.

At present, however, some music educators are experiencing discomfort with the evidently peripheral place of their subject in the school curriculum and with an apparent satisfaction with the status quo of music teaching practice among their colleagues. Thomas Regelski, Wayne Bowman, David Elliott, and others associated with the MayDay Group have in the relatively recent past raised questions concerning whether the music education profession is operating in habitually unhealthy ways, whether it is no longer adequately self-reflective or relevant to society. Kilpinen's study does much to illustrate the ways that sociology has veered off (and stayed on) the pragmatic course over the past century, showing that certain thinkers became mired in Cartesian "mentalism," made the mistake of characterizing human action as if it were guided by mere instrumental rationality, or otherwise weakened their social analyses by failing to consider humans' "habits of mind" as reflective and complex, among other things. Correspondingly, application of pragmatist principles to the practices of music education—attending consistently and closely in our teaching to the complex "habits of mind" from which different forms of musical action and their uses stem, as well as their social and political effects—has the potential not only to make music education socially relevant, but to keep it societally essential in the years ahead.

Notes


2 James's influence has been addressed by numerous music education historians, including James Keene in A History of Music Education in the United States. (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1982), 221, 224.
3 See, for example, George Herbert Mead, “Industrial Education, the Workingman, and the School,” Elementary School Teacher 9 (1909), and “The Relation of Play to Education,” University Record 1, no.8 (1896).


10 James Scott Goble, "Ideologies of Music Education: A Pragmatic, Historical Analysis of the Concept "Music" in Music Education in the United States" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1999).

Peirce scholars cite the *Collected Papers*, volume and paragraph numbers, rather than page numbers, are used in this article to reference each citation from this collection.)

12 Ibid., 6.228.

13 Ibid., 5.400.

14 Ibid., 5.487.


16 For examples of research reports using Peirce's philosophy as a philosophical grounding for studies in education, for example, see the *International Journal of Applied Semiotics*.


18 Ibid., 37.


21 Ibid., 17.

22 Ibid., 225-26.

23 Ibid., 165.


**Biographical Information**

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music cognition and semiotics, and music and social issues. Also a specialist in vocal music, he has conducted choirs and orchestras in professional, community, and educational contexts throughout North America.